THERSITES IN TROILUS AND CRESSIDA: SHAKESPEARE'S USE OF THE TRADITIONAL FOOL FIGURE

by

Martena Gray Wilson

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SIGNED: Martine Gray Wilson

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This thesis has been approved on the date shown below:

Carl F. Keppler  3rd May, 1965
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ABSTRACT

Although Thersites, a character in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, has received much attention from students of Shakespeare's plays, many questions about him remain unanswered. On the questions of his antecedents, his connection with certain figures in other Shakespearean dramas, and his place in *Troilus and Cressida*, widespread disagreement exists, as the survey of studies on the character in Chapter I reveals. In the concluding paragraphs of this first chapter, a study which resolves some of these areas of disagreement is proposed; two principal bodies of evidence—the traditions surrounding certain historical and semi-legendary figures known as fools and Shakespeare's use of these figures of tradition in his dramas, and the text of *Troilus and Cressida*—are to be used in this effort.

In the next portion of this thesis (Chapters II-III) a process of comparison and contrast between Thersites and the fools of native tradition makes it possible to establish that, in his characteristic types of jesting, his situation as a "privileged man," and his detachment, he resembles the court fool of the popular imagination. A similar series of comparison and contrast reveals that,
in his "comic relief" and commentary, he resembles the fools in Shakespeare's plays; particularly, in his perception of reality and his system of values, he resembles certain figures I have called Shakespeare's "truly-wise" fools.

In the final chapter a consideration of Thersites in Troilus and Cressida, an interpretation aided by the foregoing study of tradition, suggests that the figure points out a fundamental violation of "natural" moral order in the love plot, and a similar disruption of social order in the war plot, thereby suggesting the paradox traditionally associated with the fool: that he--by definition a deviant from the norm and unable to function in society--perceives an inner corruption, a breakdown in social order tending toward insanity, of which more normal men are unaware. In serving such a function, Thersites shares the symbolic significance of the court fool, representing the man of imagination.
INTRODUCTION

The critical goal of this thesis is a clear understanding of Thersites, a traditional figure in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. While there has been considerable critical interest in the figure, no studies have been made which concentrate fully upon gaining an understanding of his role.

I have felt it worthwhile to begin such a complete study for three reasons. In the first place, students of Shakespeare's dramas have recently (and I believe rightly) come to realize the key position which the so-called "dark comedies"—*All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Troilus and Cressida*—occupy in Shakespeare's artistic development: both in his developing dramatic technique and in his ever growing ability to give artistic expression to his insights into fundamental human problems. *Troilus and Cressida*, moreover, has been thought to be especially important in indicating the direction of this growth.

In the second place, a number of students of Shakespeare's plays, among them Robert B. Heilman and Harold C.

1. This description of the dramatic character as a traditional figure will be explained more fully in the following pages of this study.
Goddard, have found a study of the traditional figures in Shakespeare's plays often gives provocative insights into the meanings of these dramas.

However (and it is this third reason which is primarily responsible for this study), in spite of the great critical interest in Troilus and Cressida and the almost equally great interest in the fools in Shakespeare's plays, Thersites has received almost no critical attention in the last fifteen years. The problems of his antecedents and of his connection with fools in other Shakespearean dramas have not been solved, although they have been ignored. The question of his function in Troilus and Cressida, once hotly debated, has scarcely been considered, although it has not (to my knowledge at least) been settled.

To counteract, then, the current critical tendency to neglect Thersites, and in the hope that an understanding of this character may offer insights into a play which has been called the chief problem in Shakespeare, the following pages will attempt to clarify his role.

A review of the critical opinions which have appeared on our subject in the three and one-half centuries since Troilus and Cressida's publication reveals three main areas in Thersites' role about which writers are not in agreement.

The first area of disagreement consists in the problem of establishing Thersites' connection with native fool
tradition: his kinship with the semi-historical and legendary figures of English society which were shaped by the popular imagination, and with the fools which, their characteristics taken in part from popular tradition and heightened for dramatic purposes, were placed in English dramas. A collection of the material pertinent to this tradition will permit us to determine for ourselves, by a series of comparisons and contrasts, which of the various figures of popular tradition Thersites resembles. It will also enable us to determine to what extent his traits and functions are like those of the fools in English dramas other than Shakespeare's.

It is because Thersites does not resemble these latter figures in all the particulars of his role that we must consider the second disagreement about him: whether or not he resembles the fools which Shakespeare shaped for his own dramatic purposes. This effort, however, presents a considerable difficulty. It is necessary for our purposes to compare and contrast various aspects of Thersites' role with the traits and functions of other traditional figures in Shakespearean drama. But in my researches I have not discovered any single study which establishes Shakespeare's characteristic treatment of these figures. Therefore, it will be necessary to analyze their roles for ourselves. With this material at hand, we may determine
whether or not Thersites had been shaped in a characteristically Shakespearean fashion.

While writers have not, as I say, indicated Shakespeare's characteristic treatment of these figures in detail, they have suggested two distinct (though related) functions which we may fruitfully explore to determine this treatment: (1) the level of character and action; (2) the level of theme, the underlying philosophical meaning which plot and character make manifest. In the interest of clarity, it will be well to consider these two separately. We shall thus study Thersites first from the point of view of determining whether or not, in the technical aspects of his role, he resembles the fools in Shakespeare's plays; and then from the point of view of determining whether or not, he like many of these figures, occupies a place on the level of underlying philosophical meaning.

Having gained some clear notion of Thersites' heritage from our study of the native fool tradition, and perhaps some insights into his role from a study of the character in the light of Shakespeare's characteristic use of these figures of native tradition, we may then turn to the last and in many ways the most important area of disagreement which surrounds Thersites: that of his function in *Troilus and Cressida*. 
CHAPTER I

STUDIES OF THERSITES: A SURVEY

It is not possible in a single chapter to give attention to each individual commentator who has to date offered observations on Thersites, nor is such an effort necessary for our purposes. Some studies, consisting of little more than vituperation, offer scarcely any ideas about the character's antecedents or function. Ideas found in other interpretations, worthwhile in themselves, are more fully developed elsewhere. My purpose is not to offer a complete digest of the literature on Thersites, but to indicate and evaluate what scholarly commentary has offered toward a clear understanding of the character.

The early interpretations: 1609-1900. It is therefore unnecessary to consider what I call the early interpretations at great length, for I believe it will not distort the critical situation to say that these years produced no major concentrated effort to understand Thersites. Not that commentators viewed him as a character whom readers could interpret for themselves: early students of Troilus and Cressida frequently offer comments to assist the reader in judging Thersites. But, although this
impulse would seem to lead them toward a special study of the character, apparently it did not. And for almost three centuries, Thersites received short shrift indeed at the hands of editors and interpreters. Dryden mentions the character as "promising," but it is difficult to know what he means since in his revision of Shakespeare's play he draws a Thersites who scarcely resembles Shakespeare's character.¹ Nicholas Rowe is content to characterize Thersites for the reading public as "a masterpiece of ill-nature and satirical snarling."² In his famous lectures on Shakespeare, Coleridge pleads for a "careful examination" of Thersites, but is himself content with characterizing him as "a Caliban of demagogic life--the admirable portrait of intellectual power deserted . . . by all moral principles."³


A few efforts at determining Shakespeare's use of the figure appeared in this period. Dr. Johnson describes the character as a "superficial" portrait, exhibiting manners rather than nature; from the "Preface," one discovers that he finds Shakespeare's comic characters "vulgar," and manners much less worthy of exhibition than nature.¹ Hermann Ulrici, writing in Germany in 1839, concludes that the "slanderous, cowardly" Thersites is "the Choragus of the play," with "the right in his hands, from the playwright's Christian point of view."² Writing a number of years later, Gervinus offers an opposing opinion, denying that Thersites is a chorus. Because he "is the lowest on the social scale," Gervinus says, "Thersites' is not the voice that can lead us to the poet's true meaning."³ But what his voice does tell us the German scholar does not disclose.

In these observations, meager in number and limited in scope as they are, certain central ideas appear which reappear in later interpretations. We shall meet again the view of Thersites as a morally depraved cynic, together with


opposing opinions, like those of Ulrici and Gervinus, on Thersites' function. And we shall, I fear, find the same pejorative language applied with dreary regularity to Thersites. But it is doubtful that these early comments were germinal in forming later opinions on the character. Even the most provocative—those of Coleridge, Ulrici, and Gervinus—do not recognize the special problems presented by a character whose roots are buried in ancient tradition. Nor do these studies, on the whole, actually cope with the problem of Thersites' function in *Troilus and Cressida*. Ulrici comes closest to such an effort, and his conclusions rest upon his own feelings toward Christianity rather than upon any evidence about Shakespeare's religious convictions. From these early interpretations, we may perhaps profit most by regarding them as reminders of how not to proceed. An interpretation which sets out to clarify the character of Thersites must seek an understanding of his vitriolic comments: actually come to grips with the problems he presents, not simply acknowledge their presence.

The later interpretations: 1900-1965. In comparison to the dearth of material available on Thersites in the first three centuries after *Troilus and Cressida's* appearance, this later period is one of greater interest, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in *Troilus and Cressida* generally and Thersites particularly. This increased productivity
can be at least in part attributed to what S. E. Hyman calls "modern criticism": the growth of an interest in "the organized use of non-literary techniques and bodies of knowledge to obtain insights into literature." ¹ Some writers were led to apply the findings of literary scholarship to the character. Others were led to view Thersites, as part of Troilus and Cressida, without reference to the creator or milieu but as an independent artistic creation. While these two methods of gaining insights into a work of art are not mutually exclusive, this division offers a convenient means for arranging the commentary on Thersites, since (with one important exception that will be considered separately) the later interpretations have followed one or the other of the two approaches.

In point of time, the writers who apply the findings of literary scholarship to Thersites come first. Most students who seek to understand Thersites by research outside the limits of the text either show a particular interest in Shakespeare's life and in the reflections of his personality in Thersites' character, or a concern with Thersites' relation to the conventions of the Elizabethan stage. Studies of the first kind may be designated biographical; those of the second, historical-comparative.

The biographical studies. The first concentrated efforts to understand Thersites were those contributed by writers who, finding him a particularly distressing figure, explain that Shakespeare infused into the character aspects of his own personality. These writers conclude that Thersites, as a version of the Elizabethan Fool, is a kind of author-surrogate, speaking for Shakespeare's personal peevishness or misanthropy. They leave some question, however, as to what Shakespeare intended Thersites to speak for (or against). One group of commentators finds that Thersites ridicules Shakespeare's fellow dramatists.¹ A second finds him an allegorical device for criticizing certain political figures or for satirizing the Puritans' religious views.² A third (by far the largest number of these writers) sees the figure as Shakespeare's means of voicing a profound (if temporary) negation of everything mankind represents. Frederick S. Boas was one of the

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¹. Frederick Fleay, Charles Herford, and Robert Cartwright each suggest that Thersites represents Marston, Jonson and Dekker, respectively. These opinions are quoted in Variorum, pp. 374-79.

first to suggest this point of view; he posits a connection between Shakespeare's emotional state and Thersites. "A loathsome creation . . . blinded to reality by a congenital disease of moral vision," Thersites could have been conceived (Boas feels) "only in a mood of bitterest disenchantment."

In 1909, Frank Harris expands this line of thinking, and argues that Shakespeare's "tragic life story" (as he entitles his work) reached its depths at the time of writing *Troilus and Cressida*. He sees Thersites' role as Shakespeare's effort to get rid of his own bitterness. But the legendary nature of the "Dark Lady" weakens the effort to demonstrate Shakespeare's grief over his faithless black-haired lover. Also grounded in a desire to establish a connection between Shakespeare's depression and Thersites is Eduard Eckhardt's article, which is entirely devoted to establishing Thersites' position as spokesman for Shakespeare the misanthrope. Asserting that Thersites is analogous to the Greek chorus, Eckhardt says that he must be considered as "part of Shakespeare's own ego" since the character has no relation to the dramatic situation. As evidence he cites what he

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3. Eduard Eckhardt, "Zur Rolle des Thersites in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*," *Englische Studien*, LXVI (1919), 371-379. Translated orally by Hannes Baum, German exchange student, University of Texas.
finds to be Thersites' "inaccurate" criticism of the heroic Greeks and Trojans. Eckhardt's conclusions appear to be based on objective evidence. But one can scarcely help wondering about this evidence. How does he know that Shakespeare went back to the Greek drama for inspiration in creating Thersites? How does he determine that Thersites is extraneous to the drama? On what grounds does he find Shakespeare's Greeks and Trojans completely heroic other than that he assumes them to be heroic in Homer? The question at present is not the truth or falsity of his position, but simply the problem of Eckhardt's sources of information, which he does not make clear.

Such are the main examples of the biographical studies. Certainly these efforts to look long and steadily at Thersites from a carefully focussed point of view should be expected to give us a clearer picture of the character. Beside Eckhardt's lengthy and patient interpretation, for example, Coleridge's "careful examination" seems hasty and even slight. But has this diligent concentration offered a clear and convincing picture of Thersites?

One may argue that the view is clear enough since there is a central core of agreement, at least of sorts, underlying these interpretations: these writers generally suggest that Shakespeare has not converted his raw material
into an independent artistic creation. And naturally one could not expect universal agreement on all interpretive matters. Yet on all the particulars connected with Thersites' role these writers are hopelessly at odds. For example, we may grant for the moment that Thersites serves to ridicule one of Shakespeare's fellow dramatists. But then we are faced with the necessity of deciding which one: Jonson? Marston? Dekker? Some as yet unidentified person? There is the further alternative that Shakespeare ridicules none of them but is expressing his social consciousness by satirizing Essex, as Campbell suggests, or by mocking "Prynne and the iconoclasts."¹ There is, of course, also the possibility that Thersites is Shakespeare's self-portrait, the mouthpiece for a poet disillusioned with love, or life, or both. Could Thersites possibly stand for all these facets of Shakespeare's life? How could examinations of the same two bodies of material (Shakespeare's life and Thersites) produce such wildly contradictory conclusions?

One could answer these questions by taking issue with each interpretation, but I believe this multiplicity indicates the first of two almost inevitable difficulties which must plague any attempt to correlate Shakespeare's life and the character of Thersites. The first is a weakness in the reliability of the evidence upon which these

¹ Brooke, p. 576.
studies are based. As a study of Holzknecht's collection of Elizabethan papers concerning Shakespeare reveals, court records and documents provide scholars with only the vaguest outlines of Shakespeare's life. Of his personal interests and problems, of his professional relations or social position when Troilus and Cressida was written, we know almost nothing; assertions on these matters must ultimately be based upon surmise. Contemporary references are almost oracular in nature, and permit the interpreter to draw from them whatever conclusions he desires. One difficulty with this method of proceeding lies, therefore, in the infinite number of possibilities, and the absence of any clear authority which permits us to choose among them.

The situation of one who would find reflections of Shakespeare's disturbed emotions in Thersites, furthermore, is even more bleak. Since scholarship has uncovered no diaries or similar personal records which might offer insights into Shakespeare's emotional life, one must draw inferences from the play which is to be interpreted so as to obtain material with which to interpret the play. The reasoning here is inescapably circular. Thersites was created because Shakespeare was depressed. We know he was

depressed because he created Thersites. Moreover, while no one is certain of the relation between personal experience and the work of art, we may be fairly sure that it is not a simple one-to-one ratio, as these attempts to link Shakespeare-the-man with Thersites-the-dramatic-character suggest. It may seem a short step from Thersites' attitudes toward the dramatic universe of *Troilus and Cressida* to Shakespeare's attitudes toward Elizabethan England. But the actual distance between them yawns so dark and wide as to render the personal interpretations of Thersites very unconvincing.

The second weakness is seated in the conclusions which these studies draw. A study which is interested in the author is bound to focus upon the man himself rather than upon the dramatic character. The artistic creation, consequently, becomes the chief tool by which another body of material is examined: Shakespeare's life. Seeking correspondences between a literary figure and his creator may be fascinating for the biographer. But for the literary interpreter, it is not altogether satisfactory, for it does not illuminate the artistic material.

The historical-comparative studies. If efforts to explain Thersites as Shakespeare's spokesman are not altogether satisfactory, what of the studies which make use of
a more tangible body of material: that connected with Elizabethan dramatic conventions? Students who approach Thersites from this perspective began writing on the character not long after arguments like Harris's first appeared. Feeling that it is not very useful to view Thersites as a product of Shakespeare's personal feelings, they interpret him as a conventional farcical figure of the English drama, a character designed primarily to provide Elizabethan audiences with amusement.

The application of such historical material to Thersites has resulted in a number of interpretations of character. These writers do not agree exactly which conventional figure is Thersites's nearest antecedent; further, most of these authors are particularly interested in refuting the explanation of Thersites offered by the biographical studies. They usually accomplish this by arguing that Shakespeare had no personal interest in the creation of this character. J. M. Robertson, in an effort to free Shakespeare of the responsibility for creating Thersites, argues (or rather states as irrefutable fact) that the "Thersites scurrility" is not by Shakespeare's hand. ¹ J. S. P. Tatlock does not question that Thersites is Shakespeare's creation, but finds him the product of a

bored, negligent playwright, a conventional farcical character who "vastly pleased the groundlings" and was intended to accomplish exactly that.¹ W. B. D. Henderson observes that Thersites descends from Erasmus's "wise fool" and shows kinship with fools in Shakespeare's plays, but concludes that the character only "adds Folly to a sea of troubles."² W. W. Lawrence also places Thersites in the tradition of the court fool and in the company of fools in Shakespeare's plays in general. He wishes to consider the play "apart from Thersites' speech," and suggests that the character only speaks for conventional Elizabethan attitudes in his criticism of the Greeks, particularly the attitudes of the young cynics at the Inns of Court for whom (as he follows Peter Alexander in conjecturing) Troilus and Cressida was played.

A fifth view, most recently put forth and apparently widely accepted, also suggests that the play is best judged apart from Thersites' opinions. Robert Goldsmith, drawing heavily upon O. J. Campbell's findings, argues that the character is only Homer's Thersites made


dramatically credible. His language—"the muddy but
turbulent stream of billingsgate that pours from the loose
spigot of his mouth"—is unprovoked by the dramatic situa-
tion, in Goldsmith's view, and therefore characteristic of
the parasitical buffoon of popular tradition and of the
malcontent railer of Comical Satyre. He contends that
Thersites' opinions may be ignored by the modern student,
since the important dramatic characters censure them and
the Elizabethan audience would have recognized these com-
ments as worthless. 1

These historical-comparative studies (and others
similar to them which we must pass over) make up a large
portion of the writings on Thersites, and I believe they
have contributed as much qualitatively as they have quan-
titatively to the understanding of the character. They
have in part overcome the major weaknesses of the bio-
graphical studies. Not nearly so many uncertainties are
involved in relating Thersites to figures of popular and
dramatic tradition as are met in linking him to Shake-
speare's personal situation. Further, drawing parallels
between Thersites and other creations of the popular and
literary imagination keeps us generally in the area of
literary criticism and does not lead, directly at least,

1. Wise Fools in Shakespeare (East Lansing:
into biography: the vast and dark regions of Shakespeare's emotional conflicts.

The general agreement among these writers—that Thersites is a wholly conventional character created to amuse Shakespeare's audience—suggests the greater reliability, relatively speaking, of their evidence. But, before accepting this interpretation as absolutely satisfactory, we should scrutinize these various studies a bit more closely. Closer examination reveals a quantity of separate factions beneath this apparent agreement. For example, leaving aside the question of Shakespeare's debt to Homer for the moment, we may assume that Thersites is an Elizabethan dramatic character with his roots in popular and dramatic tradition. But roots in which part of the tradition? Is he shaped as a foolish clown like Robert Greene's Slipper? Or as a satirical commentator of Comicall Satyre? Did Shakespeare use the same means of shaping him that he used in designing Touchstone and Lear's Fool, a possibility which Campbell and Goldsmith vigorously deny? Or did he merely lift the character wholesale from a play like Marston's Malecontent? Finally, was Thersites intended to amuse the groundlings at the Globe? Or to confirm a more sophisticated audience in their cynicism? These more or less mutually exclusive alternatives show that the progress these studies make toward a clear understanding of Thersites is not so great as it seems at first.
In fact, we are plagued by the same fundamental weaknesses which characterize the biographical studies. It is true that no lack of reliable historical data concerning figures of popular and dramatic tradition exists. The very complexity of this tradition, as a matter of fact, is responsible for a certain amount of disagreement in the inquiries about Thersites' place in tradition. Instead of reviewing all the available historical material in their essays, these authors have generally placed Thersites in what they take to be the proper stream of tradition and support this stand only with bits of historical information. Thus Lawrence states that Thersites is a court fool while Goldsmith argues that he is related to the parasitical buffoon. But neither takes into full account the characteristics of the figures of tradition considered by the other. This failure to measure Thersites against all possible types of traditional figures has led to considerable disagreement among writers in establishing the character's antecedents and literary parallels.

But a more central weakness in the evidence brought forth by these studies is essentially the same as that found in the biographical studies: the absence of other kinds of information, information which establishes with any certainty Shakespeare's literary sources, his artistic standards, or the emotions of the Elizabethan audience.
The uncertainty surrounding the date of *Troilus and Cressida*’s writing makes it difficult to establish Shakespeare’s indebtedness to Chapman’s translation of the *Iliad*, or to Heywood’s *The Iron Age*, as Tatlock, Campbell, and Goldsmith attempt to do. Equally uncertain is our knowledge of Shakespeare’s artistic standards. Except by inference from the dramas themselves, we have no way of knowing Shakespeare’s attitudes toward his plays. Hence it seems scarcely safe to assume, as Tatlock does, that Thersites was only "intended" to entertain the groundlings, or (as Campbell asserts) to bring patrons to the theater.

Finally, if Harbage’s collection of primary evidence is, as it has the reputation of being, a thorough presentation of the material available on Shakespeare’s audience, then we know almost nothing of the emotions of these people.¹ Hence—particularly since we do not know what type of audience viewed *Troilus and Cressida*—we have no way of knowing how the character was received. He may have pleased the young lawyers or (an equally likely possibility so far as available evidence shows) caused them considerable uneasiness. Evidence which would clarify these points is mainly conspicuous by its absence, and this lack seriously weakens the effectiveness of these arguments.

A second weakness lies in the conclusions these studies draw, quite apart from the reliability of the evidence. With the partial exception of Lawrence’s study, they tend (I feel) to divert the student’s attention from Thersites to the raw material in which he has his source. Of course knowledge of the figures of native tradition is vital to an understanding of a character whose roots are in this tradition. But these studies succeed less in illuminating Thersites’ unique qualities than in reducing him to "nothing but" a conventional figure. And yet, as even the most stalwart defenders of this approach grant, there remains (as Tatlock notes in conclusion) an "unexplained residuum" which these interpretations do not handle satisfactorily.

A third group of studies, however, appearing not long after the biographical and historical interpretations, began an effort to get at this unexplained residuum. I have designated these interpretations, which are largely restricted to the text of Troilus and Cressida, as intrinsic studies.¹

The intrinsic studies. The technique of close reading—the intensive study of the text itself (and inferences drawn therefrom) used as the central body of evidence—has not produced many detailed studies of Thersites. Those which have appeared, however, concentrate either on determining Thersites' place in the structure of the play or his place on the level of philosophical meaning. In an important though brief study of Troilus and Cressida, William Empson, noting Thersites' relation to the traditional fools of English drama, argues that he and Pandarus serve the parallel function of commenting on the action, "one mocker each to love and heroism." One only wishes this provocative study were broader in scope, for Empson only analyzes the various meanings which one word, "general," takes on as it appears in Thersites' role; this scarcely gives an adequate view of the character. Empson, it is clear, purposely restricts himself to a structural study. But most other intrinsic studies which deal with Thersites have been particularly concerned with insights found inside the work of art. Guided by Wellek and Warren, and Shumaker, I have chosen the phrase "intrinsic studies" to describe interpretations which are concerned primarily with the work of literature as an independent creation.

his place on the level of philosophic meaning, or "theme."
G. Wilson Knight, one of the first to consider Thersites' place in the drama's system of values, finds him and Pandarus commentators on the action, and suggests that they provide a neat microcosmic reflection of the central conflict between Intellect and Intuition which (according to Knight) Shakespeare intended to portray. In his view, Pandarus is a kindly and sympathetic figure, a symbol of Intuition. Thersites, on the other hand, is "cynicism incarnate, a demoniac spirit," the symbol of Intellect, of all that is worthless and wrongheaded. The frequent appearance of descriptive terms like "cynical relativist" and "nihilist" in later studies suggest how influential Knight's view of the character has been. And other writers imply a similar conclusion, if they do not call him a cynic. E. M. W. Tillyard finds Thersites a court fool who twists everything "to the vile and loathsome," a character who has his "own foul interpretation of others' [opinions] cast back upon himself." A study


by A. S. Knowland suggests that, "with the sensibility of a guttersnipe," the commentator Thersites serves to "coarsen the tone" and deny value of anything which exists above Time's flux. \(^1\) It is easy to reach an unfavorable opinion of Thersites from these studies. But even this view of the character has not been universally accepted. George Meyer says that there is no doubt that Thersites "speaks Shakespeare's mind" when he "calls the right things by the right names" in condemning the pagan warriors. \(^2\) And D. A. Traversi and L. C. Knights apparently feel that the character has no place whatever on the level of underlying philosophical meaning, since they make no effort to fit the character into their interpretations of the drama. \(^3\)

What can be said of the contribution these studies make to our understanding of Thersites? In their favor, it may be said that studies conducted from this approach

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have certain marked advantages, at least so far as our particular problem is concerned, over the biographical and historical-comparative interpretations. On the whole, these writers do not become entangled in speculations concerning Shakespeare's emotional conflicts or artistic standards. Nor do they place an undue emphasis upon his life, or upon the source and literary parallels of Thersites.

But however praiseworthy certain aspects of these interpretations may be, no single study succeeds in resolving the problems surrounding Thersites. We still do not know out of which stream of native tradition the character emerges. We remain uncertain about his kinship with traditional figures in other Shakespearean dramas. And (if Thersites is indeed a commentator, as these writers suggest), we are yet uncertain for whom he speaks, or for which values he stands. Why does this confusion remain?

One could reply by attacking each interpretation, or by criticizing the technique of basing conclusions upon intensive study of the text's poetry. But I think the source of this confusion can be understood by considering certain oversights which are characteristic of these treatments of Thersites.

The first, though understandable from the point of view of writers who concentrate on *Troilus and Cressida*'s text, nevertheless circumvents understanding of the
character. It lies in the writers' failure to bring valid historical material to bear in studying Thersites' function. Of the most thorough of these intrinsic studies—those by Knight, Knowland, and Tillyard—only the last mentions Thersites' place in tradition, and he makes no substantial use of this material in interpreting Thersites' role. In the briefer studies, Empson alone places the character in English stage tradition, and he makes little use of this information. There is much to be praised in the critical notion of viewing poetry as poetry. But as Cleanth Brooke asserts, the student of literature "needs all the help he can get." And when history can clarify and enrich the meaning of poetry, can it safely be cast aside? One writer, whose interpretation I have purposely withheld until now, suggests that this question can only be answered in the negative. Wyndham Lewis, after discussing in detail the court fool's place in tradition—that of a ritual scapegoat, one who sees things from an unbiased point of view because he is a social outcast—describes Thersites' role in the light of this tradition. He explains, "Thersites, as a horrible clown ... is allowed to express a great and neglected view of truth .... As an outcast, [he] speaks ... 

an objective, and not a functional, truth." Unfortunately, Lewis does not elsewhere expand this remark, so that we cannot determine what is meant by "objective," or what view of truth Thersites supposedly suggests. Moreover, the pejorative phrase "horrible clown" in part obscures the real departure this statement makes from other interpretations. But this comment, based as it is upon historical research into the fool tradition, at least suggests the aid historical material may offer in understanding Thersites' function in Troilus and Cressida.

A second weakness of these studies is more difficult to understand. Presumably, Knight, Knowland, Tillyard, and Meyer do not intend to imply that Thersites is Shakespeare's spokesman for the playwright's personal problems, but rather that he is Shakespeare's commentator on the situation of Troilus and Cressida. Yet, since a commentator (by definition puppet-like) presupposes the presence of a puppeteer, the absence of substantial evidence plagues these interpretations: we are not acquainted with material which tells us that Thersites "speaks Shakespeare's mind," even on the subject of Troilus and Cressida. Tillyard's and Knowland's efforts to remove Thersites from Shakespeare's own opinions, although admirable, leave important questions

unanswered: one examines Tillyard's essay in vain for evidence from the text which indicates that Thersites' opinions are erroneous; this alone, it seems, would support his view of Thersites as an unreliable commentator. Knowland makes no reference to the text to support his opinion of Thersites as an untrustworthy commentator who denies all permanent values. But it is Knight's interpretation which, although it almost entirely removes Thersites from the realm of Shakespeare's personal point of view, best reflects the danger of seeing a dramatic character as a commentator. Knight's opinion, forcefully argued, ends by placing all truth in Pandarus' voice, all untruth in Thersites'. Yet there is no single, simple truth in great creative literature, and Shakespeare rarely, if ever, divides truth from falsehood, good from evil, as neatly as Knight attempts to do. The whole idea of a commentator conjures up the image of a stage manager of sorts, one who has been wound with a key and given a set piece to recite, made up of abstract generalizations, so that the viewer will "know" dramatic truth. But, whatever the truth of Troilus and Cressida, we have no reason to assume that Shakespeare wound up this character and put him in the drama for the express purpose of revealing it.

It has not been my intention to attack, any more than it has been to defend, the various methods by which
these writers have arrived at their interpretations of Thersites. But it has been my intention to give some idea of the full extent of the confusion which surrounds him, a disagreement obscured by the uniformly condemnatory description of the character; to indicate the inadequacies, whether in evidence or in conclusions, which are responsible for what I see as the absence of a satisfactory understanding of his connection to tradition and his function in Troilus and Cressida. Let us turn, then, to an effort to clarify as many of these uncertainties as possible.
CHAPTER II

THERSITES AND THE NATIVE TRADITION

Fancy, Folly, Simplicity, Gelasmius: these names are those of characters found in the dramas of English playwrights; their ancestry may be traced to historical and semi-legendary personages of ancient popular tradition. This complex tradition has been extensively studied by various scholars. But in the hope that this well-known material may yield new insights into the character and role of Thersites, we will again examine it.

These historical and semi-legendary traditional figures of English popular and dramatic tradition have been called by various names in their long history, but for our purposes may be identified as fools. A fool may be defined as a personage who, because of real or assumed mental deviations from the norm or social inadequacies, is set apart from his fellow beings, supplying more normal men with amusement. Stage fools, their characteristics drawn in part from life but heightened for dramatic purposes, are characters who, because of certain stylized defects, stand apart from the principal characters, providing spectators with amusement and frequently acting
as intermediary between stage and auditorium. For reasons which will become apparent in later chapters, I have found it necessary to distinguish the fools in Shakespeare's plays from the fools in the dramas of other English playwrights. To make this distinction I have chosen to refer to the traditional figures in all English dramas but those of Shakespeare as English stage fools.

The Fool in Popular Tradition. The popular imagination, not the imagination of playwrights, first conceived these figures. There were a number of social types, personages who were all more or less competent members of society, which Englishmen looked on as fools. One group earned this appellation because its members lacked the judgment and sense of normal men: the half-wit, or "natural," deficient in native intellect, was often regarded as comical; silly pedants, braggarts, and fops, deficient not in native intellect but in common sense, were personages of English society who amused less pretentious men. The English rustic, deficient in sophistication rather than common sense, was also a social type which the more

knowledgeable Englishman found entertaining.¹

A second group of personages were termed fools because they neglected their own ultimate self-interest—divine salvation—by indulging in offenses against the common morality or in various forms of dissipation.² The decks of Brandt's Ship of Fools were full of the courtly time-servers, the lustful, and the criminal, all of whom were felt to be ridiculous as well as evil by the sixteenth-century Englishman.³

The defects of these harmless and vicious fools did not prevent them from carrying on the normal round of human activity; if their foolishness set them apart from their fellows and made them a laughingstock, they were not aware of the fact. But a third group of personages, incapable or uninterested in taking on the burden of social responsibility, became professional entertainers of their fellows.

¹ O. M. Busby, Studies in the Development of the Fool in English Drama (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), pp. 22-23, discusses the influence of these figures, especially the last, on the English stage fool. See the examples of Elizabethan uses of the word "fool" listed under the first entry for the term in the Oxford English Dictionary to gain an idea of the Englishman's apparent attitudes toward these figures.

² The Oxford English Dictionary records this "Biblical use" of the word, showing that it was applied to vicious or impious persons.

Two types of personage were known as professional fools: the buffoon, a parasitical trickster who was deficient in his lack of moral scruples and humanity, and the court fool, like the "natural" a constitutional mental defective. Since the English stage fool's lineage is in large part traceable to these figures, it will be useful to note the characteristics with which the popular imagination invested them.

Historically, the buffoon combined a love of creature comforts with a naturally irresponsible disposition, and became an absurd ne'er-do-well. He wandered from feast to feast, playing practical jokes and exploiting his own moral shortcomings for gain: he "gave words and received coats and garments." The figure was completely absorbed in satisfying his various appetites, and was morally irresponsible in these efforts.

The court fool, on the other hand, combined a ludicrous helplessness with a reputation for divine possession to become both sub-human and supra-human. The figure was exploited for his bizarre appearance, but he was also

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1. Welsford gives Till Eulinspiegel and Marcolf's cruel pranks as examples of the buffoon's inhuman, unscrupulous conduct, pp. 44-52. She comments on the figure's heartlessness, p. 50; his immorality, p. 6.

2. Welsford, p. 55.  
3. Welsford, p. 3.

5. Empson, p. 47.
invested with a certain symbolical significance. This regard was very different from that accorded to the buffoon, and deserves special consideration.

The fascination which the court fool held for his English owner lay chiefly in his occasional lapses into sense; his ability to express truth secured him a reputation for inspiration. This view of the figure, Welsford indicates, must be traced to the reputation possessed by the shaman-like madman of ancient times: the madman's reason was believed to have ceased to function because he had become the mouthpiece of a spirit. But she does not dismiss the traces of awe that clung to the court fool's motley as mere vestiges of primitive superstition. Rather she asserts that the source of the awe which earned the court fool the paradoxical title of "wise fool" lies partly in the grotesque's position as an observer of life, and partly in "man's undying thirst for the non-rational."

Thus in popular regard, if not in historical fact, the

1. Welsford, p. 61, 76.
3. Welsford, p. 76-78.
5. This distinction between the actual historical court fool and the court fool in popular lore is important: as Nevill Coghill points out, the former figures were, in
court fool was characterized by a detachment which permitted a vision of objective truth and by the possession of intuition, which perceived spiritual truths lying beneath the facts which the intellect comprehends.

The various groups of personages which Englishmen knew as fools all had their origin in antiquity: the harmless and vicious fools were omnipresent social types; the professional fools were scarcely less universal, appearing in Greek and Roman times, later on the Continent, and of course in Ireland and England.\(^1\) It was as a result of the blending of the two types of professional fool that a third type was created. With the fall of the Roman Empire, personages in the buffoon tradition migrated into England, many of them dissimulating their wit in order to occupy the place of the court fool who was already installed in the houses of English nobility. This intermixture created the "artificial" court fool.\(^2\) As a rule, the figure was remarkable only for his mimicry of the feeble-minded "natural."\(^3\) But from time to time there were artificial court fools who used this mimicry for a deeper purpose; they dissimulated

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\(^1\) Busby, pp. 9-21. See also Wyndham Lewis, p. 204.
\(^2\) Goldsmith, p. 7.
\(^3\) Ramsey, "Introduction," pp. c-c1.
their intelligence sufficiently to enjoy the court fool's license of criticizing the powerful with impunity.¹

**The Fool of Dramatic Tradition.** The development of the English stage fool is a complex record of the merging and mingling of the characteristics of these various figures. Now, as we shift our attention from everyday life to drama, these distinct categories will merge, for the typical English stage fool was most often a heterogenous mixture of all these types.² Because we are interested in general trends rather than in the dramatic characters in and for themselves, we shall outline the traits which English stage fools as a whole had in common.

As would be expected of dramatic figures whose historical counterparts traditionally provided amusement for their fellow beings, the typical English stage fool was created primarily to amuse the theater patrons. From the beginning of his stage career, the English fool was expected to supply a commodity known as "comic relief," a humorous interlude intended to effect a change in dramatic tone for the purposes of allaying excessive dramatic tension.³

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As a rule, the stylized defects which dramatists deemed most useful for this function were those with immediately popular appeal which had long been a part of the repertoire of the various laughter-producing figures of popular tradition. A weak-brained stupidity, a penchant for all human follies and weaknesses, a preoccupation with creature comforts: these were the dominant traits in the typical English stage fool's character. Further possibilities for entertainment were found in the conventional comic devices of "scurvy faces," ridiculous fisticuffs, acrobatics, verbal misunderstandings, practical jokes, vulgarity, and nonsense of all kinds.

Throughout medieval and Elizabethan drama, dramatists made use of these comic traits and devices in several ways. Some English stage fools merely wandered in and out during lulls in the action, making fond and frivolous gestures or reciting nonsense. A stage direction, preserved in the text of If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody, suggests how desultory such appearances must often have been: "Enter clown beating a soldier, and exit."

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2. Busby, pp. 67-68. The phrase quoted is from the Elizabethan satire A Pilgrimage to Parnassus, quoted by Busby, p. 41.
However, while English playwrights relied heavily upon such farcical traits and comic devices, not all drew their stage fools so crudely. Some of these figures were given a suitable place in the play. The two Vices in Skelton's *Magnificence* are representative examples of the more carefully drawn typical English stage fool in his early form. Fancy and Folly, court fools who are given traits characteristic of the vicious fools in Brandt's *Ship of Fools*, are woven into the action of the moral interlude by their prominent part in the intrigue. They have a place on the allegorical level, representing avariciousness, cunning, and vanity. But these functions are relatively superficial. Their main purpose is to divert the audience, and they accomplish this by means of the traits and devices outlined as characteristic of the typical English stage fool. Fancy's comical feeble-mindedness and Folly's ridiculous love of gain are their most notable characteristics, and are exploited for comic purposes. The major portion of their role is made up of misunderstandings, practical jokes, and lengthy nonsensical monologues: broad farce.

2. For the parallels between Skelton's Vices and the vicious fools in Brandt's work, see lxxix-lxxx.
3. Skelton, II.xvi-xvii; both scenes are completely given over to this kind of entertainment.
As English drama evolved, the stage fool evolved too. By 1590, some changes had taken place in his role: he had become more often a retainer than an intriguer; this gave rise to the dramatic function of providing a link between upper and lower plots. But the primary function of the typical English stage fool remained that of providing humorous entertainment, and the means by which he accomplished this end changed very little. Simplicity, in Robert Wilson's *Three Ladies of London*, is one of the first of the fully evolved English stage fools and may be taken as representative of the whole group of these figures in Elizabethan drama. He becomes the servant of a principal character, and serves as a link between the three ladies (the representatives of Good) and the Vices. But his primary function is that of arousing laughter, which he does by the comic traits of gluttony and cowardice, and by exhibiting a general inability to look out for his own self-interest, as when he makes an immediately obvious error in appraising Dissimulation's character: he says, "Thou art an honest man." He also produces comic relief

1. Busby, p. 32.
2. Busby, pp. 52-53.
by the conventional devices of verbal perversions and misunderstandings. With Simplicity may be compared Miles, in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, and Slipper, in *James IV*. Miss Busby suggests that these figures represent what she calls the "high-water mark" among English stage fools before Shakespeare. Yet the major portion of their roles is made up of such farcical devices as those of Simplicity and his predecessors.

Ordinarily then, even when the English stage fool was given a place in the play, English dramatists seem to have made little effort to shape his comic entertainment to contribute to the dramatic proceedings. There are, of course, a few exceptions: occasionally the stage fool offers an implicit commentary on the characters and action of central dramatic figures, as in *The Puritan*, where the character of Nicholas St. Antlings, an English stage fool, is a ludicrous burlesque of the principal character, a Puritan widow who is a hypocrite; in *The Old Law*, the actions of Gnotho and his foolish confederates parody those of their betters. But these figures, like their

1. Wilson, pp. 253, 298.
2. Busby, p. 33.
3. In *The Puritan; or the Widow of Watling Street*, now attributed to Wentworth Smith (J. Tonson, 1734), pp. 3 and 23, the widow protests her faithfulness to her husband.
fellow English stage fools, remain primarily farcical characters.

Were there nothing more to the English stage fool than these farcical characteristics, which he inherited from the harmless and vicious fools and the buffoon, he would be of little interest. But another function grew up with the English stage fool that lifted him out of the purely farcical realm: that of explicitly commenting on the action. This function must be traced to the English stage fool's other ancestor, the court fool, the being who was permitted (in medieval, Tudor, and Elizabethan times) to speak unpleasant truths to those in power.

In countless medieval French sotties, medieval playlets resembling English moral interludes, historical and semi-legendary personages had donned the traditional garb of the court fool to comment on the follies of the powerful. Erasmus had created Moria, the personification of Folly, to speak objective truths in criticism of worldly men

whom she supposes deceased and almost immediately becomes affianced to another; pp. 12 and 59-60, Nicholas proclaims his religious principles, and then turns out to be a thief. A similar parody is found in The Old Law, included in The Plays of Philip Massinger, IV, ed. W. Gifford, 2nd. ed. (London: W. Bulmer, 1813), III.i.505, in which Gnotho, like his betters in I.i.467, tries to rid himself of his old wife by changing the law.

2. Welsford, p. 239.
of state. Naturally the English stage fool, related to this figure of popular and literary tradition, was ready-made to function as a commentator on the character and action of the principal figures.

This function developed alongside the dominant one of providing farcical amusement. We can look back at Skelton's scheming Vice Folly, already examined as a figure who provides farcical amusement, and see that he criticizes the clerical abuses perpetrated by Cardinal Wolsey. It was not until the English stage fool became fully evolved, however, that this second function began to be significant. It is notable in the role of Simplicity, another figure we have seen as primarily a comical character. To make him a suitable commentator, the playwright has detached him from the action. As an outsider to the dramatic intrigue, Simplicity comments frequently upon the character and action of principal figures. He takes each of the four evil figures to task with the license characteristic of the privileged court fool; he

1. In *The Praise of Folly*, trans. John Wilson, ed. Mrs. P. S. Allen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), pp. 99-102, for example, Folly criticizes "our merchants, . . . who, though they lie . . . yet shuffle themselves into the first rank, and all because they have Gold Rings on their Fingers"; though she promises to "pass over our divines in silence," she is actually quite harsh in criticizing the degenerate clergymen, pp. 114-117.

2. Skelton, ll. 1239-1252.
informs the spectator of a climactic moment in the action when the four villains meet to hatch new plots.¹

Like the wise comments of Erasmus' Moria, Simplicity's comments occasionally suggest the paradoxical question, "Who is the wise man, who the fool?" and the spectator is left to reach an unexpected answer: those who think themselves wise are actually not so wise, while Simplicity, who appears to be a fool, is wise in fact. This ironic reversal comes about because, while the spectator sees the aptness of many of Simplicity's comments, the principal characters are blind to his wisdom. In such a situation, spectator and stage fool laugh together at the folly of those who suppose themselves to be wise, and the temporal gaps between the inspired madmen of ancient Greece, the medieval Moria, and the Elizabethan stage fool seem very narrow. But such moments are all too rare in this figure's role, and practically non-existent in the roles of other English stage fools.

Merrymaking and occasionally commenting on the action: these, then, are the two major dramatic functions of the English stage fool. Such a figure is not necessarily a dramatic liability. His character and action could be designed so as to offer implicit commentary on the

character and action of the principal figures; his explicit commentary could be designed to offer direct information about the proceedings of the action.

But the typical English stage fool is scarcely more than a dramatic liability, weakly characterized and "thrust into plays by head and shoulders ever since Kempe could make a scurvy face. . . ." 1 The character is generally restricted to the comic realm of custard-pie-in-the-face slapstick. His favorite jokes have nothing to contribute to the action; in fact, they often stop it just when it should be allowed to proceed without interruption. So it is with Fancy's and Folly's interminable haggling over a mangy cur; 2 so it is also with Simplicity's verbal perversions and lengthy monologue about gluttony. 3 Moreover, this farcical entertainment is often provided at the expense of the spectator's understanding of the drama; thus Simplicity's gluttony—a trait conventionally a part of the typical English stage fool's role—makes him rejoice when the venerable old Hospitality is murdered by the drama's villains; this abrupt alignment with the figures of evil casts doubt on Hospitality's good-heartedness and confuses

1. Busby, p. 25.
2. Skelton, II, xvii.
us as to Simplicity's moral position. Furthermore, even when the typical English stage fool functions as commentator, the information he relays is often not relevant to the drama's central issues (as with Folly's satirical thrust at Wolsey), or, if relevant, practically self-evident (as with Simplicity's comment on the meeting of the four villains).

As a matter of fact, the typical English stage fool is a dramatic liability at least in part because of the difficulty inherent in mixing antithetical dramatic functions. As merrymaker, he is the butt of the audience's laughter. As commentator, he directs the audience's laughter toward the principal characters. The two functions are in "natural dramatic opposition": they stand at the opposite poles of comedy. ¹ At the one end is the alazon, who creates laughter by his inferiority. At the opposite pole is the eiron, who creates laughter by awakening a sense of another's inferiority. Accordingly, as the typical English stage fool has qualities of both alazon and eiron, a necessary inconsistency in character results.

It is this inconsistency which mars Simplicity, who, functioning as alazon, does not recognize Dissimulation in one scene but later, functioning as eiron, recognizes

him easily and exposes him to the audience's ridicule.¹ This same inconsistency is characteristic of most other English stage fools. Gelasmius, the bitter wise fool of Archipropheta, at times scourges the queen Herodias for her lust but at other times begs the queen's handmaidens for kisses, offering to pay for them. In criticizing Herodias he is the eiron figure, focussing the audience's attention upon the viciousness of the folly of lust. But in suing for the handmaidens' affections, he aligns himself with the vicious folly and becomes a ridiculous lecher, the butt of the audience's laughter.² Similarly, a professional fool, Thersites, in Heywood's The Iron Age criticizes the nobles for going to war over Helen, but later in the drama he becomes involved in the war himself.³

1. Wilson, 253-254, 257.

2. Nicholas Grimald, Archipropheta, included in The Life and Poems of Nicholas Grimald, L. R. Merrill Yale Studies in English, Vol. LIX (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1925) II.ii.259, he appears as both alazon and eiron in a single scene. See also III.v.293-95, in which he is the butt of the audience's laughter, and IV.ii.313-15, in which he directs the laughter against Herodias.

3. Thomas Heywood, The Iron Age I and II, published in Heywood's Dramatic Works, Vol. III (London: John Pearson, York Street.-Covent Garden, 1874), III.i.301, he quips, "So many heavy blades to flye in pieces/ For such a piece of light flesh?" But in the second part of The Iron Age he aligns himself with the wicked Sinon, I.i.358.
Now that we have surveyed the complex tradition associated with these figures, we are prepared to take a direct, though as yet limited, look at Thersites. It will be well to remember that the figures of popular tradition were of several kinds, each with a peculiar set of characteristics ascribed to him by the popular imagination. As the reader will also recall, most English dramatists ignored these distinctions to a large extent in fitting these traditional figures into their plays, taking over those traits and devices which most readily provided farcical entertainment and often sacrificing total dramatic effect for the sake of providing this kind of entertainment. In the concluding paragraphs of this chapter, we may use this material to attempt to determine Thersites' kinship with these figures of popular and dramatic tradition.

In the light of the characteristics commonly attributed to each of the major types of fools, it seems evident that Thersites is not intimately related to the harmless or vicious fools who carry on the normal round of human activity. Instead, he shows an affinity with the fools who are professional entertainers. He is frequently referred to as "fool" by himself and others in the play; he is requested to entertain the warriors on several occasions; he receives the praise and applause afforded
any professional entertainer: all these traits suggest that the figure represents one who has entered the ranks of the professional fool. But with which of the professional fools does he have most in common?

To assist us in determining Thersites' kinship with the buffoon, we may recall that the buffoon was an unscrupulous ne'er-do-well, concerned with satisfying his appetites, whether they be those of hunger, sex, envy or a vile sense of humor. In spite of the conclusions of those who link Thersites to this figure, Thersites does not appear to fit the common conception of this merry knave: he lacks the talent of taking life easily, and makes no attempt to "lick up something for nothing" as the buffoon supposedly did. As he himself says, he has no envy for those in higher social positions: "Ask me not what I would be if I were not Thersites, for I care not to be the louse of a lazar, so I were not Menelaus." Nor does he seem "the slave of his own sense of humor," as Goldsmith says of him. His blistering condemnation of

1. The Works of William Shakespeare, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York: Harcourt-Brace and Co., 1948), II.i. 58-92. Patroclus applauds him with "Good words, Thersites," II.i.93. Similar fool scenes are found in II.iii.40-70, and V.i.3-30. All subsequent quotes will be taken from this edition; Troilus and Cressida will hereafter be abbreviated TC.

2. TC V.i.65-67.

Patroclus, for example—"thou idle immaterial skein of sleeve silk . . . Ah, how the poor world is pestered with such waterflies. . . ."—has little humor in it.\(^1\) If he takes pleasure in it, it is a very strange type of pleasure indeed, for he immediately bursts into a bitter denunciation of Patroclus' "male-whore" relationship with Achilles. Both speeches almost echo those of more famous Shakespearean characters who show contempt for effeminate courtiers: Hamlet mocks Osric as a "water fly,"\(^2\) and Kent abuses Oswald in language similar to Thersites'.\(^3\)

This is not the place to suggest kinship between Thersites and any other Shakespearean figure. The only reason for mentioning these parallels is to suggest that, since these speeches cited by Goldsmith do not show Thersites to be a parasitical buffoon, it seems well to regard the possibility of this connection with some reserve. On the other hand, what of the likelihood of a connection with the court fool?

As Lawrence, Tillyard, and others have suggested, Thersites' role indicates that he is conceived in this tradition. Although not feeble-minded or silly by nature, as was the actual historical "natural" court fool, Thersites

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1. TC V.i.31-35.
2. Hamlet V.ii.83.
shows certain traits which were popularly associated with the figure. For one thing, the devices he utilizes for his comments are those characteristic of the figure, such as chop-logic and benedictions. For another, he speaks with the license permitted only to this privileged being: he is, for example, continually allowed to criticize his betters to their faces. Though he is constantly threatened with beatings, the ordinary lot of the court fool, he is more or less protected by his position: as Achilles says, "he is a privileged man." Most important, he possesses the detachment characteristic of the court fool: He is an outsider in the society of the Trojan War. This kinship naturally calls to mind the symbolical significance which was characteristically attached to the court fool: it suggests that the figure is an observer of the dramatic situation, not a participant, and thus able to view the action objectively. Clearly this detachment will have some bearing on his function (as Wyndham Lewis suggests) and will merit further consideration in later pages.

1. TC II.iii.45-67.
2. See TC II.i.47-54 for example.
3. TC II.iii.61.
4. This is suggested by the fact that he is bound by no particular loyalty to a single character on the Greek side; by the final act, he mingles with warriors of both camps. Moreover, he shows no interest in advancing his own position.
But for the present, what of his connection with the English stage fool?

Since Thersites does not engage in intrigues, the distinguishing characteristic of the English stage fool in his early form as Vice, it is clear that he does not resemble this figure. On the other hand, he does resemble the fully evolved English stage fool: he is fitted into the dramatic action as a retainer of sorts, serving Achilles as emissary.\(^1\) Further, he shows the detachment from the action characteristic of figures like Simplicity: he takes no part in the Trojan War, but comments upon the actions of figures in both Greek and Trojan camps with impartiality.

However, in other and perhaps more important ways he does not resemble this figure. Were he a typical stage fool, he would have to be slightly simple, a prey to all human follies such as lechery or love of gain, and particularly fond of creature comforts; he would have to lean heavily upon such devices as "scurvy faces," vulgarity and nonsense.

Yet these traits and devices are not prominent in his role: he continually defeats Patroclus in battles of wit, and amuses by mental agility, not mental sluggishness. He shows no interest in the vicious follies of

\(^1\) TC III.i11.305-06.
desire for lechery or in the creature comforts which attract Folly, Simplicity, Gelasmius and most other typical English stage fools. Moreover, he does not depend on the usual comic devices to create laughter at his own expense; he functions as eiron rather than alazon. It is on this account that Campbell's and Goldsmith's suggestions which relate Thersites to the farcical figures of Comicall Satyre must be rejected; while Macilente and Carlo Buffone are often the butts of the audience's laughter, Thersites is not exposed to the spectator's ridicule. Finally, he does not provide farcical interludes which interrupt the progress of the drama. While the English stage fool entertains by random appearances, Thersites' appearances are clearly designed to follow major scenes.\(^1\) Although the English stage fool's humor is generally desultory, Thersites' jests, while couched in the conventional rhetoric of the English stage fool, do not offer a means of diversion from the central issues which the major scenes present, but focus upon these issues. Clearly, if Thersites provides simple amusement as Tatlock asserts, he does not do so in a manner characteristic of the typical English stage fool. What functions do his appearances serve in the drama? What do his comments indicate about the drama's action? These questions, central to any clear understanding of the character, must be answered by a

\(^{1}\) TC II.i; II.iii.
thorough examination of Thersites' part in *Troilus and Cressida*; we must deal with them in detail later. But first, we must seek stage fools with which Thersites has more in common, for they might offer clues to his role in the drama. In hopes of discovering such characters, let us turn to a study of Shakespeare's use of these traditional figures.
CHAPTER III

THERSITES AND THE FOOLS IN SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS

Various scholars have pointed out Shakespeare's liberal use of English stage conventions in shaping his traditional characters. An examination of the fools in his plays bears out this opinion. Throughout Shakespearean drama we find the popular and social types of English fool tradition: the harmless and vicious fools and the professional buffoons and court fools which formed the basis for the character of the English stage fools. Further, the fools in Shakespeare's plays are detached from the principal action and equipped with comic traits and devices which provide humorous entertainment, as well as with comments which offer information on the proceedings of the action. All these characteristics are found in the fully evolved English stage fool's role.

But it has become almost a critical commonplace to remark that traditional figures in Shakespeare's plays are not like those in most English dramas; there are characteristics in their roles which set them apart from their

1. Goldsmith is primarily concerned with pointing out the conventional traits in the roles of Touchstone, Feste, Lavache, and Lear's Fool. See also Coghill, pp. 7, 8-10, 11-14.
counterparts in other Elizabethan plays. The playwright adapts the popular fool types—the fop, the peasant, the buffoon, the court fool—to suit his own purposes. In many cases, he ignores English stage conventions, placing fools in comedies which require no formal comic relief and in tragedies which are too serious for the typical English stage fool. He eliminates the inconsistency in characterization which is so conspicuous in such representative English stage fools as Simplicity and Gelasmius, just as he does most untimely and irrelevant jesting. Even in an early play, like The Two Gentlemen of Verona, much jesting is on the subject of love, a subject central to the play.

These technical refinements, frequently noted by students of Shakespeare’s fools, are far from insignificant. But they are only the external manifestations, I believe, of even more essential differences between the fools in Shakespeare’s dramas and the fools in the dramas of other English playwrights. These differences become

1. Busby, p. 36, notes that English stage fools were introduced into comedies which threaten, for a time, to end badly. "It is the clown’s office," she says, "to restore that equilibrium . . . which is the essence of comedy." In tragedies and chronicle plays, she says, "we do not find many instances of the introduction of the clown."

2. See, for example, III.1.265-382.

3. Goldsmith emphasizes these improvements, pp. 48, 51-52. See also Busby, pp. 32, 37, 39, 55, for comments on Shakespeare’s skill in treating the function and characterization of the English stage fools.
apparent in the contrasting reaction which moderns have
to these two groups of figures: while the typical English
stage fools are regarded as excrescences on the drama, fools
in Shakespeare's plays become an organic part of the dra­
matic structure. How does Shakespeare manage, more suc­
cessfully than most other English dramatists, to fit these
characters who have no formal, no necessarily essential,
place in the plot, into his dramas? It is necessary, in
order to determine Thersites' relation to fools in Shake­
speare's plays, to consider the mechanics by which Shake­
speare accomplished this feat.

The Fool in the Fable. One means is found on
the purely technical level of Shakespeare's plays: the
way in which the dramatist contrives to fit these figures
into his plays.

His characteristic shaping of these figures is
revealed in the first of the two main aspects of the fools'
roles: that of comic relief. The characters of Nathaniel
and Holofernes, of Dull and Costard (all in Love's Labor's
Lost) and of Falstaff in the King Henry IV plays and the
action of Don Armado in Love's Labor's Lost, of Launcelot
Gobbo in The Merchant of Venice, of Elbow and Pompey in
Measure for Measure serve an obvious comic function. But

1. This phrase is borrowed from Goldsmith, p. 95.
the comedy of these characters may not be dismissed as simple farcical entertainment; it is too closely connected with the main action. Analysis reveals a single pattern: in each case, an apparently incidental sub-plot character or episode has been placed alongside a character or episode of the main plot. This juxtaposition invites the spectator to compare or contrast upper and lower plots; he can scarcely help inferring significant similarities or differences between the figures involved. These two inferences offer the key to the two ways that Shakespeare exploits this technique.

The first consists of juxtapositions which stress similarities in character or action between figures in upper and lower plots. The characters of some fools in Shakespeare's plays parallel the characters of principal figures. The pedantry of Nathaniel and Holofernes corresponds to, and ends (though they are unaware of this result) by poking fun at, the pedantry of the four philosophical young courtiers.¹ In Much Ado About Nothing and The Merchant of Venice, the loquaciousness of Dogberry and Launcelot Gobbo parallels, in exaggerated form, the endless witty conversations of upper plot figures.² Other traditional

¹. Love's Labor's Lost IV.i.124-32. The nobles reveal their scholarly pretensions throughout; see particularly I.i.1-15 and III.8.179. Hereafter this play will be referred to by the initials LLL.

². See Benedick's and Beatrice's verbal thrust-and-parry, III.i.226-255 and Dogberry's and Verges' quibbles.
figures parallel the principals through action, rather than character. Don Armado's actions burlesque (unconsciously, on his part) the courtiers' betrayal of their vow to give up feminine companionship. The same pattern emerges in more serious plays. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica's desertion of her father is echoed in burlesque form by Gobbo's desertion of his master. Even so minor a facet of the fool's role as Gobbo's dress reflects the covered-with-gold motif which is central to the main plots: when Bassanio hires Gobbo, he at once orders him a livery "more guarded than his fellows". In another serious drama, *Measure for Measure*, Elbow's actions, like Angelo's, have the ultimate result of confounding Justice and Iniquity.

A variation of this sort of juxtaposition is found when the fool's actions seem less simple blunders than tongue-in-cheek humor. So it is in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*,

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III.iii.1-51. H. C. Goddard says, "The parody... sets us to wondering how much there is to choose... between the polishing of the King's English by Benedick and Beatrice and the murdering of it by Dogberry." *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Phoenix Books, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), I, 279.

1. Cf. I.i.37 and 59-68 and I.i.15-18 and II.i.179-80. In these lines, Don Armado and one of the nobles, Berowne, each swear the oath and then betray it. Note also the juxtaposition of Don Armado's and Berowne's extravagantly phrased love missives, both of which miscarry: IV.i.58-85 and IV.ii.135-150.

2. II.ii.116.

3. II.i.45-181.
when Launce's protracted farewell to the silent cur Crab
echoes Proteus' extravagant farewell to the speechless
Julia. And again, in *King Henry IV, Part 1*, Falstaff's
play-within-a-play obviously parallels (as Falstaff him-
self comments) the meeting of Hal and his father in a
later scene; Hal's condemnation of the fat knight is even
more biting than Bolingbroke's own criticism of his son's
"rude" companions. The "play extempore" also anticipates
the actual banishment scene of the final act.²

The second way consists of juxtapositions which
stress differences, rather than similarities, in character
and action between figures in upper and lower plots.
Thus in *Love's Labor's Lost* Dull's stolid common sense
which prompts him to insist upon plain spoken English
contrasts with the lack of common sense in Nathaniel and
Holofernes; a lack which leads them to prefer inkhorn
terms.³ Similarly, Costard's sensible acknowledgment of
the need for physical comforts contrasts with the courtiers'

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1. II.ii.5-21 and II.iii.1-65. Hereafter this
play will be referred to by the initials TG7.

2. Cf. 1 Henry IV II.iv.470-475, and 489-505,
in which Falstaff argues against his own banishment and
Prince Hal criticizes the knight, with III.ii.14-15. Hal
suggests his intention to banish Falstaff in the same scene,
527.

3. LLL IV.ii.12, 21, Dull repeatedly calls the
dying deer a pricket. But the whole discussion of the
deer's nature becomes buried in Nathaniel's and Holofernes'
Latinisms, 13-19.
unrealistic denial of these needs as they vow "not to see ladies, study, fast, not sleep!" Falstaff's ebullient love of jest, characteristic of him in both parts of King Henry IV, contrasts with the cold-blooded natures of Bolingbroke and John of Lancaster, although it is not an entirely acceptable alternative to their lack of humor. His open avowals of self-interest contrast, too, with Hal's less frank plan for "redeeming time" by his reformation. And differences in action, like these differences in character, also point up elements which have dramatic significance.

In As You Like It, Rosalind's delightful behavior toward Orlando, in the complex jest of Rosaline-as-Ganymede, is set off by Touchstone's supercilious treatment of Audrey. Falstaff's unwillingness to risk physical harm, which culminates in his shameless counterfeiting of death and sham victory over Hotspur, contrasts with the eagerness of Hal and Hotspur to move into battle and the valor with which

1. I.i.48. Costard explicitly expresses reluctance to follow the nobles' punishment of fasting for a week with bread and water, saying "I had rather pray a month with mutton and porridge," (I.i.305). He also continues his acquaintance with Jacquenetta.


they face death to achieve honor, military glory.¹ And the faithfulness of Lear's Fool to his master in following him into the storm stands out against the heartless actions of his wolfish daughters.²

By these two sorts of juxtaposition, then, the comic antics of these figures (as well as those of many others which we must pass over here) are woven into the structure of Shakespeare's plays. It is thus scarcely accurate to think of these figures as providers of humorous "relief," in the pain killing sense of the word: their comedy rarely serves to allay the spectator's dramatic tension. It is more satisfactory to regard them (as Ros­siter suggests) as providing "relief" as the word is used in sculpture: as offering a background which brings out the essential form of the principals.³ But before we go on to consider in detail the effect this use of the figure has upon the spectator, it will be useful to consider the second important aspect of these figures' roles: their

1. ¹ King Henry IV V.i.127-9 and V.iii.59-63. Compare these comments with the meeting of Hotspur and Prince Hal, V.iv.62-67.

2. ² King Lear II.iv.75-86. Cf. the fool's declaration of loyalty with Goneril's efforts to fan feelings of disloyalty toward the King in her servants, I.iii.12-25.

explicit comments on the action.

The commentary of the fools in Shakespeare's plays, like their comic relief, also differs from the conventional remarks of the typical English stage fool. Aside from the obvious comic function such comments may perform, many of them serve other functions which are immediately related to the dramatic situation. For one thing, they make explicit, in epigrammatic fashion, significant elements in the principals' attitudes or conduct which the spectator might otherwise only sense. Although much of Launce's patter, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, is simply amusing, some of his comments serve this purpose as well. He focuses upon Valentine's lack of mental agility when he calls the central character a "notable lubber." Similarly, his soliloquy to the audience, which begins "I am but a fool, look you, and yet I have the wit to think my master a kind of knave," may soon degenerate into near nonsense, but this comment sums up one aspect of Proteus' essential nature.¹ Falstaff's distrust of the "sober-blooded" John of Lancaster points up the craftiness and untrustworthiness so basic to the latter's character.² Feste's criticisms of Olivia and

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¹. II.v.46; III.i.261-263. Valentine shows his silly nature when he permits himself to be duped by Proteus, III.i.237-40. Proteus directly states his knavish plans, II.vi.31-41, and carries them out just before Launce's entrance, III.i.248-53.

². 2 King Henry IV IV.iii.91-95. Lancaster is,
Orsino for their sentimentality, like the Fool's continual harping on King Lear's unprotected state, also provide keys to the principal characters' attitudes. In the same way, these comments often focus upon the central characters' conduct, rather than on their attitudes. At times the comments may seem naive. Bottom's chance comment pinpoints the situation of the various sets of lovers: "And yet, to say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays." And the Fig-Bearing Clown's warning that the asp's bite is "immortal" and his wish that Cleopatra have "all joy o' the worm," contribute to the dominant impression, so carefully created by Cleopatra's own words, that the queen's death is for her a happy occasion. At other times, the comments are delivered with a knowing air. Concluding his catalogue of Valentine's courtly love symptoms with "now you are metamorphosed with a mistress that, when I look on you, I can hardly think you are my master," Speed calls attention to the principal character's shift from a mocker of love to a lover. He also focuses upon Valentine's

as Goddard remarks, p. 205, the most dastardly character in the play. His untrustworthiness is shown in the same scene, 79-80.


2. A Midsummer Night's Dream III.i.146-47.

3. Antony and Cleopatra V.i1.247, 261.
diffidence ("proper" for a servant of courtly love, but high folly in real life) which proceeds from his stupidity in a mocking aside offered on the occasion of Sylvia's transparent hint to encourage her admirer: "Oh jest unseen, inscrutable, invisible/ As a nose on a man's face, or a weathercock on a steeple!"¹

In addition to offering explicit comments on the situation of the main characters, these figures' comments may also build dramatic atmosphere. As early as Titus Andronicus, the Clown's jests heighten the horror of the tragedy. The figure enters with a reference to "The gibbet-maker," and exits with a jest on his own hanging; the whole has a pathos about it that adds to the horror of Saturninus' cruelty.² The death's-head jesting of the gravediggers strikes the note, halfway between a grin and a grimace, which characterizes the early scenes of Hamlet's final act.³ Lucio's jesting about venereal disease, like Pompey's and Mistress Overdone's talk of brothels and pandering, is in large part responsible for giving the impression of the moral rottenness which pervades the main

¹ TGV II.i.141-43.  
² IV.iii.80-83; IV.iv.39-49.  
³ See, for example, the jests on the gallows-maker and gravediggers, V.i.46-50, 63-76. In these lines, laughter and tragedy are yoked in a manner so often characteristic of Hamlet himself.
plot of Measure for Measure. 1

It is thus that the comments of Shakespeare’s fools, like their comic relief, become a vital part of the dramatic structure. But it does not therefore follow that we can turn these figures into moral spokesmen, who hold the answer to these dramas as tomorrow’s paper contains the solution of today’s crossword puzzle. While some phrases offer clear insights into the central dramatic situation, others only confound. What can be made, for example, of Falstaff’s opinion of Honor? It expresses a point of view relevant to the dramatic situation, which centers in a questioning of the various meanings of this word. 2 But Falstaff’s point of view is itself not a wholly suitable one. What purpose, then, can these comments, and these figures’ comic relief, serve?

As I see it, the fools in Shakespeare’s plays contribute—in the partially accurate, partially limited, but wholly artistic manner that any fictive character’s role contributes—to the spectator’s imaginative comprehension of the drama. As we have already noted, the burlesque repetition in the comic relief of these figures (and burlesque does not, of course, necessarily mean satiric belittlement)


2. See Knights’ discussion of the importance of this concept in the King Henry IV plays, pp. 40-43.
emphasizes significant moments in the drama. Though the spectator may not be consciously aware of some of these correspondences, they frequently affect his reactions to these moments. For example, Launce's leave-taking of Crab and his punning on the tide ("tied") reflect upon, and deflate, Proteus' extravagantly sorrowful leave-taking of Julia, which is also followed by gay jests on losing the tide. The scene of parody does not nullify the sentiments. But it widens the spectator's vision, enabling him not only to see Proteus' sorrow, but also to realize that this volatile grief may not be taken at face value. Similar scenes of parody in Shakespeare's plays function in the same way to enlarge the spectator's vision and (frequently) to modify his views of the principal characters. It is this sort of background which the "relief" of the fools in Shakespeare's plays provide.

Just as the fools' comic relief deepens the spectator's understanding of the drama, so the comments of these figures play a part in influencing the spectator's response. They may bring to the fore certain undercurrents which have been expressed in, or at least implied by, the dramatic context; these explicit interpretations of character or action may affect the way the spectator sees the principal characters. In his images of the old king as a foolish one who has made "thy daughters thy mothers," Lear's
Fool picks up Goneril and Regan's own idea ("Old fools are babes again . . ."), and drums it into the King's and the audience's ears. This reiterated picture of the king as one who has much to learn has its place in aiding the spectator to see Lear--not as a "dragon in wrath," as he images himself--but as the immature and undeveloped being he is. Comments like these (as well as the others which we have examined) serve to make explicit the dramatic context within which the principal characters are to be viewed.

It is a part of Shakespeare's technical skill that, in shaping these figures to establish this dramatic context, he drew upon the resources inherent in his raw material and fundamental to his medium: the irony found in the traditional fool figure, and in the art of the theater as well. Irony occurs when the intended meaning of words, or the looked-for state of affairs, clashes with the literal meaning, or the actual outcome of a situation; when the end result seems as if in mockery of the promise or fitness of things. It gains its force from the power to generate "one of the keenest pleasures . . . of the reflective human mind: the pleasure of contrasting Appearance with Reality."  

1. I.ii.187-88; I.iii.19-20; I.i.125.

The harmless and vicious fools and the professional buffoons of English society permitted more normal Englishmen to contrast Appearance and Reality: though they felt themselves to be unusually clever, they were seen by normal men as actually ridiculous. The court fools, on the other hand, implied a different sort of contradiction between Appearance and Reality: They had the outer accoutrements of fools but (as seers of truths often obscured to men actively involved in society) they were often seen as wiser than normal men. Drama also gains a part of its power to move, Sedgwick argues, from this contrast. The theater itself may be termed an "ironic convention," in that it gives the spectator the sense of Reality (the world of the all-seeing observer) controlling Appearance (the puppet-like world of dramatic illusion).

This latent but ever-present element in the viewer's consciousness is brought to the fore when he witnesses the dramatic protagonist acting in ignorance of his true condition. Such moments produce that sharp sense of contradiction which moderns call dramatic irony.

Tradition, then, made the figure of the fool well suited for passing judgment upon the behavior and attitudes of more normal men; the fool often called attention to a


2. Sedgwick, p. 43. He points out the comparatively modern date, 1833, of the coinage of the term "dramatic irony," p. 23.
flaw in character which the ordinary man in society preferred to overlook. In creating the fools that appear in his dramas, Shakespeare drew upon this tradition. Juxtapositions of parallel character and action, and succinct expressions that stress significant aspects of a character's attitudes or conduct: by these means, the fools in Shakespeare's plays offer the spectator a view of the dramatic situation denied to the central characters. As Nathaniel and Holofernes point up the pedantry of the nobles, and as the Fool makes obvious one side of the King's character which the protagonist himself overlooks, the fools often emphasize the fact that the principals, dupes of their own lack of self-awareness, act in ignorance of their true condition. Whether they perform this function unintentionally or intentionally, the fools help to create in the spectator that sense of contradiction which Sedgewick designates dramatic irony.

By utilizing these resources inherent in his material, Shakespeare makes these figures an integral part of the dramatic structure. Few other English playwrights (as we have seen) consistently used the fool figure in this fashion. This dramatic technique is only one aspect of the fundamental difference between the fools in Shakespeare's plays and other English stage fools. But before turning to the second difference, we may examine portions
of Thersites' role to see if it shows evidence of Shakespeare's shaping hand.

It will be recalled from our study of the figure in the preceding chapter that Thersites, as the "privileged man" of Troilus and Cressida, is modeled on the lines of the court fool, and detached from the dramatic action, functioning to provide both comedy and commentary. These characteristics he shares with the English stage fools and the fools in Shakespeare's other plays as well. But he also possesses certain traits not ordinarily a part of the English stage fool's role. For one thing, Thersites has not been handled in a purely conventional way. Unlike the dramatic portrayals of most court fools, he lacks the naivete of the idiot, as well as the pointless equivocation and self-seeking character of most "artificials." The master-fool relationship between Ajax and Thersites, and then later between Achilles and Thersites, is not a typical one. For another, he appears at moments which do not require a humorous interlude to release emotional tension, and again on occasions which are too serious for most English stage fools. Moreover, he is not at some points the drama's alazon and at others the eiron; he remains (eiron-fashion) one of the quickest-witted characters in the play, and is never at the mercy of the spectator's laughter.
More importantly, his comic relief and commentary show signs of Shakespeare's characteristic treatment of the fool figures throughout his plays. One scene, for example, offers a particularly obvious parody of a principal character. Preceding it, the warrior Ajax has characterized himself. He says to the generals, "I do hate a proud man as I hate the engend'ring of toads" and then, by his shameless gobbling-up of their flattery, he shows his own thick-headed conceit. In a second scene he snubs Achilles by greeting him only with "Ha?" and "Aye, and good next day too."¹ In the scene which particularly interests us, Thersites' description of the warrior's posturing catches the accent of the slow-wittedness and conceit which Ajax has shown:

Why, 'a stalks up and down like a peacock . . . .
Bites his lips with a politic regard, as who should say, "There were wit in this head, an 'twould out . . . ." ²

Immediately afterward, he burlesques the warrior's conduct, even to imitating his phrasing, in the "pageant of Ajax."

Patroclus speaks Thersites' lines, and Thersites himself plays Ajax:

Patroclus: Jove bless great Ajax!
Thersites: Hum!
Patroclus: I come from worthy Achilles.
Thersites: Ha! ³

¹ Troilus and Cressida II.iii.169; III.i紧张.66-70.
² III.i紧张.250-56.
³ III.i紧张.280-85.
And the clever mockery continues. A juxtaposition which stresses similarities between fool and principal character, the whole played over with an air of conscious humor (like Launce's burlesque of the lovers' farewell or Falstaff's play-within-a-play), is characteristic of one sort of Shakespearean comic relief. Other examples of juxtaposition that stress contrasts between the principal characters and Thersites also abound. There is, for example, the contrast between Thersites' bitter disenchantment with the Trojan War and the central characters' placid acceptance of, or even eagerness to participate in, the skirmishes of the conflict. This resembles the contrast between Falstaff's attitude toward Honor and that of the principal characters. In these instances (as in others which we shall consider in detail later), Thersites' comic relief provides a characteristically Shakespearean background against which the principals are seen. And his comments also serve, in typical Shakespearean fashion, to give him an integral place in the structure of the drama. To take but one example of a wide range of statements, we may examine his criticism of Helen. Like Launce's comment which focuses attention upon Proteus' knavery, like Feste's criticism of Orsino and Olivia, Thersites' references to Helen as a woman of easy virtue—a "placket" and a "whore"—point out her essential nature as we see it when she and Pandarus jest in
the suggestive, silly cocktail-party chatter of the court.¹

His comments which suggest her intrinsic worthlessness repeat what principal characters also on occasion state: as Hector says to Troilus, "Brother, she is not worth what she does cost/ The holding." Diomede makes an even harsher observation: "For every false drop in her bawdy veins/ A Grecian's life has sunk. . . ." Thus in his comments on Helen (as in others which we must momentarily pass over), Thersites underscores a central aspect of a main-plot character's attitudes; the spectator's view of the character is in part shaped by Thersites' interpretation.² And Thersites' various references to running boils, to dried and rotted food, and particularly to sexual disease—the "Neapolitan boneache" and the "dry serpigo"—are in part responsible for establishing the pervasive dramatic atmosphere, the feeling of "almost physical nausea" which the play creates.³ It is a feeling similar to, but more intense than, that created by the subplot characters in Measure for Measure.

¹. Thersites' comments (II.iii.23, 80) prepare the spectator for the introduction of Helen and her off-color jests and flutterings in III.i. The general tone of her conversation is suggested by a comment to Pandarus, 119-120: "Let they song be love. This love will undo us all. O Cupid, Cupid, Cupid!" Pandarus' song is frankly bawdy.

². II.ii.51; IV.1.69-70.

³. This feeling is mentioned by Knights in his discussion of the play, p. 80.
On the level of structure at least, where character and action are of first importance, Thersites becomes an integral part of the drama. In this, he shows a direct kinship with the fools in other Shakespearean plays. Why should Thersites be given these (and similar) opportunities to burlesque the main-plot characters? What, exactly, do these juxtapositions indicate about the characters, and how significantly do they contribute to the spectator’s understanding of the drama as a whole? To consider these questions would necessarily entangle us in complex question of function which, since we are at present only concerned with determining Thersites’ relation to Shakespeare’s other fools, must be postponed. Let us instead consider a further fundamental difference between fools in Shakespeare’s plays and other English stage fools.

For it is not only on the level of action that the fools in Shakespeare’s plays, unlike the typical English stage fools, become an integral part of the drama. Most English playwrights, as we have seen, shaped the roles of the fools by the dictates of stage convention: the comic traits of gluttony and self-seeking, the devices of scurvy faces and ridiculous fisticuffs were drawn not from life but from stage custom, serving to break the dramatic tension. It is thus useless to seek an understanding of the
human heart and mind in (for example) Simplicity's sudden alliance with the forces of Evil when he criticizes the benevolent Hospitality. It is similarly fruitless to seek insights into Magnificence's human plight in Folly's cruel practical jokes or Fancy's nonsense.

But there is something of human nature in Holofernes' pedantry and in the faithfulness of Lear's Fool. Moreover, the one's inkhorn terms and the other's prodding of Lear's conscience point up, in different ways, the principal characters' difficulties in understanding their own nature and the nature of the world around them, and selecting an adequate system of values. Here, then, lies a second fundamental difference between the fools in Shakespeare's plays and the typical English stage fool. The former, generally true to certain aspects of human experience, frequently serve to relate the dramatic action to this experience. Thus they occupy a place not only on the level of action, but also on the level of the meaning of the action, a part of these dramas I have called the underlying philosophical meaning, or theme.

The Fool in the Theme. Beneath the level of action, most Shakespearean dramas probe with varying degrees of seriousness the problem of distinguishing between the appearance of things and their reality, and of establishing a
system of values whereby man's essential nature is fulfilled. This pattern of meaning underlying the human struggles which Shakespeare's plays record may be termed the theme of "Appearance versus Reality." Many of the fools in Shakespeare's plays embody, in their characters, action, position, and dress, various aspects of this pattern of meaning. In considering the extent to which the roles of these figures point up the central theme, we may regard it from two distinct (though naturally related) points of view: first, from that of man's difficulty in perceiving reality; second, from that of man's problem in ordering his values.

In the former aspect of this theme, which I have designated the "ambiguity-of-appearance" strand, the fools are shaped to emphasize the obstacles which hinder man's efforts to perceive reality. The nature of these obstacles is suggested by variations upon what has been termed the "clothes pattern" of images—matters of undress, dress, and the special dress which is disguise—and the "sight pattern"—matters of blindness, eyesight, and the special internal vision which is insight. The clothes pattern locates one source of man's difficulty in external reality,

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1. These terms are used by Robert Heilman, *This Great Stage* (no place: University of Washington Press, 1961), pp. 25-26. The term "ambiguity of appearances" was suggested to me by Dr. Carl F. Keppler, Shakespeare lecture 231, University of Arizona.
in the disguise by which someone, by means of assumed dress, manner, or counterfeiting of character, gives a false impression of his true nature. The sight pattern places the other source of error at the opposite end of the perceiving process: within the person, in the habit of mind by which he interprets external manifestations. For one who does not habitually look beneath appearance, it is possible to see persons or situations otherwise than as they are. Although categorization of dramatic characters may be risky, suggesting a rigidity which may squeeze life from the dramatic fiber, it will be useful for describing with a minimum of confusion the ways in which these figures suggest the ambiguity of appearance through both the sight pattern and the clothes pattern.¹

Certain fool figures, which for clarity of reference may be called "literal fools," are hindered in their perception of reality by a serious short circuit in their internal perceiving apparatus. Lacking the sharpened common sense which permits some measure of self-awareness and the sixth sense which gives insight, they hold a highly

¹. These categories are primarily intended to describe the modes of perception and the systems of values which these figures exhibit. They do not necessarily follow the conventional grouping of the fool figures, the sort of classification which Goldsmith, for example, makes use of in his treatment of "wise fools" in Shakespeare's plays. There is, however, some historical justification for them. See supra, pp. 32-36, and infra, p. 94.
romanticized view of themselves and their world. Such a figure is Don Armado in *Love's Labor's Lost*, who thinks of himself as a great hero and a greater lover. Similar to him are Nathaniel and Holofernes, who see themselves as preeminently capable "of taste and feeling."¹ The three of them turn the everyday occupants of the English countryside into creatures strangely distorted by "figures pedantical": the milkmaid Jacquenetta becomes "more fairer than fair . . . ., truer than truth itself. . . ." A dying deer is compared to an apple "who now hangeth like a jewel in the ear of caelo, the sky, . . . . and anon falleth like a crab in the face of terra, the soil, the land, the earth."² Similar figures are Andrew Aguecheek and Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Sir Andrew thinks himself a drinker, fighter, and wencher just as Malvolio deludes himself into believing that he may easily cross class lines and become a count. Both fall victim to false appearance, Malvolio to Maria's contrivance, Sir Andrew to Toby's encouragement and at last to Viola-as-Cesario.³ Themselves deceived by appearances, they also

¹. *I.i.iii.59-68*, Don Armado wishes himself compared to Hercules and Samson. Nathaniel and Holofernes express their high opinion of themselves, *IV.ii.29*.

². *IV.i.61-63, IV.ii.3-7*.

become potential sources of deception for others. To the simple Dull, a few scraps of Latin make Nathaniel and Holofernes learned bookmen. Sir Andrew has enough of the superficial "manner" of fashion to convey to Sir Toby (for a time at least) the impression that he is truly cultivated, as he believes himself to be.

Other figures, which I call for ease of discussion "worldly-wise fools," possess the common sense necessary to appraise one aspect of human nature—the most obvious side, the side which demands the satisfaction of bodily comforts. But, because they lack that element in the perceiving apparatus which permits them to see beyond the range of the purely pragmatic, they take what is revealed by cynical insight for everything. Thus they also become, in a deeper sense, victims of false appearance. Romeo's companion Mercutio (who, although not a fool in the conventional sense of cap and bells, yet serves in some ways as a jester) mocks the man of fashion with the accuracy which indicates a sharpened common sense: "these strange flies . . . these perdonami's." But his jests about Rosaline—"her . . . straight leg, and quivering thigh/ And the demesnes that there adjacent lie"—are no longer appropriate because of Romeo's new, much deeper, feeling for Juliet. Jests in

such poor taste (and there are a number of them) suggest that Mercutio has failed to perceive his friend's change of heart, a change which has made sex more than intercourse between (as Mercutio coarsely jests) "an open et cetera" and "a poperin pear." In the same way the professional jester Touchstone is fully aware of physical requirements, yet fails to give proper weight to feelings which the dramatic context shows as having a certain intrinsic dignity. In the love of Rosalind and Orlando he sees but the physical affair of two healthy young animals: "If a hart do lack a hind/ Let him seek out Rosalind." Pandaros, in Troilus and Cressida, sees little in Helen besides her physical beauty, overlooking her intrinsic worthlessness. Characteristically showing a concern for the superficiality of physical appearance, he completely lacks the ability to comprehend the reality of moral scruples. After all, he is Cressida's uncle, and her guardian. Yet he engineers the illicit rendezvous with Troilus, and shows a peculiar insensitivity, an insensitivity amounting to obtuseness, toward Cressida's hesitations about the affair.

Not only guilty of failing to see things as they

1. II.iv.34; II.i.38.
2. III.ii.107-08.
actually exist, the worldly-wise fools are also frequent sources of deception for others. The mischievous Puck of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, lacking the humanity which would tell him that mortals (although certainly fools) yet have feelings that should not be tampered with, tangles the lives and loves of the young Athenians with magic pansy-juice.¹ More often, the worldly-wise fool adopts disguise in his own person, whether physically or psychologically, to camouflage reality. Launcelot Gobbo hides his identity from his nearly blind father; Touchstone continually assumes the pose of a knowledgeable courtier and attempts to trick Audrey into an illegal marriage.² Pandarus engineers the concealment of the Troilus-Cressida affair and heaps apparently insincere flattery upon Helen.³

These two groups of figures, then, suggest two possible errors in perception, creating in turn (whether purposely or unconsciously) facades of appearance: the special dress of disguise. But a third group of figures function rather differently within this strand of underlying

¹. Puck's trickster-like attitude is shown in III.i.120-21: "And those things do best please me/ That fall preposterously." Welsford, p. 51, calls him the only heartless trickster-buffoon in Shakespeare's plays.

². *As You Like It* III.iii.90-95.

³. TC III.i.85. The talk of "honey sweet queen" is hurriedly ended once he reminds Helen to make Troilus' excuse, III.i.154.
meaning. These figures, whose mode of perception I emphasize by calling them "truly-wise fools," like the worldly-wise fools, possess an awareness of motives, of man's physical needs and worldly ambitions. They can appraise the actions of those who permit others to manipulate them or who manipulate others. But they also "see feelingly," beyond the domain of the realist and into the realm of the spirit, a realm which a sharpened common sense alone cannot penetrate. Their insight may be but a flash of perception, gone almost as quickly as it comes. So it is with Bottom, who is generally mindful only of the proper care and feeding of his "mortal grossness," and yet, through all-but-inspired syntactical errors, is uncannily successful in communicating the essence of his "dream" of love. Or it may be a consistent way of looking at the world. The Bastard, Philip Faulconbridge, expresses his scornful mockery of King John's and Pandulph's Machiavellian policy: "Mad world! Mad Kings! Mad composition!" In this and other criticisms of "worshipful society," he shows how clearly he sees through the flowery phrases with which crafty politicians hide their actual, ignoble motives.

1. *King Lear* IV.vi.152.
3. *King John* II.1.561; I.i.205. See also IV.iii.115.
view of Honor—"What is Honor? A word. What is in that honor? Air... Honor is a mere scutcheon"—eats at the mask which the glittering abstraction assumes when Hotspur uses it. Similarly, Falstaff's criticism of the sober-blooded Lancaster picks out the noble's true nature: the untrustworthiness which lurks beneath promises. Feste gives the impression of seeing past momentary enjoyment to ultimate costs when he says "... and pleasure will be paid, one time or another." And Lear's Fool sees unerringly beneath appearance. He takes advantage of every opportunity to remind the King of his actual state of affairs after he has divided his kingdom. At Lear's concern for Goneril's bad temper, the Fool reminds him, "Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning. Now thou art an O without a figure." Nor does Goneril's thinly veiled threat baffle the Fool: to her most undaughterly efforts to control Lear, he comments, "may not an ass know when the cart draws the horse?"

Although not themselves victims of errors in perception, these figures yet constitute a source of possible deception for others. Bottom's accident with the ass's

1. 1 Henry IV V.i.135-37; 2 Henry IV IV.iv.94-95.
2. Twelfth Night II.iv.72-73.
head makes him more than ever an unlikely candidate for Titania's love, and also offers a delightfully ironic comment on love's transforming nature. He appears to have been changed into a less-than-human beast, but Titania has, as she promised, made him a spiritual being. Falstaff's appearance leads Hal to see him only as a "bolting hutch of beastliness."¹ Feste dissembles in a priest's gown on one occasion, and he, like Lear's Fool, is disguised by the dress and position imposed by the jester tradition.² It takes eyes sharpened by common sense, and strengthened by the insight of intuition—eyes like Kent's, for example—to pierce these outer appearances and see the truly-wise fool's accurate and occasionally profound observations.

The literal fools and worldly-wise fools are at once victims of self-deception and agents of deception for others, the truly-wise fools, perceivers of actuality but disguised by their position as fool. In these ways, the traditional figures in Shakespeare's plays become almost embodiments of the obstacles which hinder man's perception of reality. This in itself warrants according them a

1. ¹ Henry IV II.iv.495.
2. ² Twelfth Night IV.i.i.5-10. The professional jesters are regarded as mere fools by many of the principal characters: in Twelfth Night, Olivia sees Feste's comment on her sentimentality as "idleness," I.v.71; in King Lear, Goneril and Regan see the Fool as devoid of sense, I.iv.220.
significant place in this strand of meaning. But they do more, I believe, than embody the "sight pattern" and the "clothes pattern" in their persons. Consider, for example, a play like Twelfth Night, in which the theme of blindness and sight, self-deception and disguise, is central. Major errors in perception by main plot figures are repeated by figures in the subplot. Just as Malvolio falls in love with an unsuitable sweetheart as the result of a note which appears to be in Olivia's handwriting, so Olivia sets her heart upon the girl Viola, disguised as an attractive boy page. Malvolio's outlandish dress, assumed for his lover's sake, is the comic counterpart of Viola's assumed dress. And Andrew Aguecheek's error in mistaking Sebastian for Viola-as-Cesario is identical with Olivia's error, and counterpart to Antonio's error in thinking Viola-as-Cesario to be Sebastian. By echo and contrast, the literal fools add new layers to the problem of deceptive appearance—the clothes pattern—and of distortion within the mind—the sight pattern. The worldly-wise fools may also emphasize errors in the principal characters' mode of perception by such correspondences. Pandarus' error in judging Cressida parallels Troilus' failure to understand her true inner

1. For the latter error, cf. III.ii.42-44 with IV.i.50-54 and 60-65, V.i.80-85.
character. 1 Or these figures may emphasize the principal characters' mode of perception primarily by contrast rather than echo. So it is with Touchstone's view of Orlando's verses: he mocks them for their false gallop and sees them as worthless; Rosalind, although able to laugh at their shortcomings as art, sees their value as declarations of love. 2 The truly-wise fools generally point up errors in perception by comments and conduct which cut through layers of appearance. In a play like Henry IV 1, which centers in the question of Honor, Falstaff's comments bring into focus the humbler realities of war: the broken legs, the men who serve only as cannon fodder. These things Hal and Hotspur generally leave out of account in their talk of military glory. 3 In the same way Feste alone voices the key to the problem of mistaken identities by remarking, "Nothing that is so is so." 4 By piercing layers of appearance as the principal characters are unable to do, and by setting up false appearance which the principal characters should see through but often do not, the truly-wise fools

1. Troilus sees that he has not known all of Cressida's nature, V.i.135, just as Pandarus at last senses the "something" in her nature which he had previously ignored, IV.iv.89-90.

2. III.ii.118-120, 173-75 and 184-88.

3. 1 Henry IV IV.i.70-73. For the principal characters' opinion on the war, see V.i.85-90, V.iv.63-70.

4. Twelfth Night IV.1.10.
also focus upon the main difficulty which the principal characters in Shakespearean drama face: that of perceiving reality aright.

Thus the fools in Shakespeare's plays add, through variations upon the "sight pattern" and the "clothes pattern," to the ambiguity-of-appearance aspect of the appearance-versus-reality theme. And just as they become central to this strand of underlying meaning, they also become relevant to the second aspect of this central theme, the strand which I call the "nature of nature."  

On this second strand, the fools' persons signify the several systems of values by which man, in line with his perception of reality, orders his life. These possible orderings of values may be suggested by considering the forms which external nature may take. Through the bad taste of a gardener or an era, the nature which comes under man's control may become decorative artifice: as in Versailles' gardens, branches may be crimped into baskets and

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other "unnatural" shapes; hedges may be trimmed into freakish scallops. Nature in this form becomes pure artifice, and suggests the confining, capricious order of social affectations and conventions. But there is also a nature beyond man's reach: the riotous tangle of the jungle, the world where elemental, amoral forces contend and creatures depend upon their strength and cunning for survival. The law of nature in this sense is the law of self-preservation: as Falstaff says, "If the young dace be a bait for the old pike, I see no reason in the law of nature but I may snap at him." Finally, nature may also suggest man's productive control of nature, the harvest: nature-as-beneficent, where harmful elements have been controlled and "natural" productivity encouraged. Natural law in this sense implies a code of cultural and moral ethics which permits man to rise above individualistic struggles to a level of mutually shared duties and loyalties for a richer, more rewarding existence. Again our categorization of the fools will be useful in describing the various ways in which these figures embody, on an individual level, the systems of order suggested by these states of nature.

The literal fools pervert their own natural desires

1. 2 Henry IV III.ii.354-55. Knights makes use of this same comment in his discussion of nature in Macbeth, p. 132.
and feelings by following the capricious standards of social convention. Thus Don Armado first agrees to cloister himself for three years without the companionship of women. Once struck by Cupid's dart, however, he falls into love "by the book": "Adieu, valor! Rust, rapier! Be still, drum . . . . I am sure I shall turn sonnet." Nathaniel and Holofernes are also motivated not by their own feelings but because "the text most infallibly concludes it." They plan to attend a dinner because "society, saith the text, is the happiness of life." Twelfth Night's Sir Andrew, thinking in terms of the artificial conversations of the court, cannot comprehend Maria's broad invitation to intimacy, or Toby's even broader "... front her, board her, woo her, assail her."3

The worldly-wise fools, on the other hand, are not at all willing to devote themselves to acquiring the superficial manners of social convention. In making fundamental human drives socially acceptable, these affectations often prevent their satisfaction. Finding this satisfaction important, these figures "follow nature" (generally with gay rascality rather than rapacious cunning) in the social Darwinian sense, the second sense in which I have used the

1. **LLL** I.ii.187-90.
2. **IV.ii.173**, 167-68.
3. **I.iii.59-60**.
word. Touchstone, although often assuming the postures of the court, is generally on the lookout for ways to satisfy bodily needs. He has every intention of marrying Audrey in a fraudulent ceremony because "man hath his desires."¹ Launcelot Gobbo gives in to "the fiend's friendly counsel" in leaving the Jew; he ignores his conscience in the interest of achieving Bassanio's "rare new liveries" and "fairer tables."² In Measure for Measure, Pompey mocks the lawmakers' effort to curb man's natural appetites: he maintains that the only way the houses of prostitution can successfully be closed is "to geld and spay all the youth of the city."³

It is the figures I have called truly-wise fools who, in their persons, seem to rise above nature in this sense and follow natural law in the sense of a code of duties and loyalties to others. The simple Launce, in The Two Gentlemen of Verona, takes the punishment for Crab's ill-mannered social act of urinating in the banquet hall. He lists other demeaning punishments which he has suffered to protect the cur: "... I have sat in the stocks for puddings he hath stolen, otherwise he had been executed. I have stood on the pillory for geese he hath

1. As You Like It III.iii.81.
2. The Merchant of Venice II.ii.27-31, 167, 116.
3. Measure for Measure II.i.240-41.
Such actions are not altogether quixotic. They spring from a sturdy bond of loyalty and affection which master feels for servant, feelings which are in themselves of intrinsic merit, no matter how seemingly misplaced. Faulconbridge, in King John, suggests these values less ludicrously. Although declaring himself a follower of self-interest, he criticizes the king for following Commodity, the Machiavellian self-seeking which makes the world "who of itself is poised well/ Made to run even upon even ground," fall off its course "from all direction, purpose, course, intent . . . . "

The natural order of a world untainted by self-seeking is actually embodied in Faulconbridge. He, the "natural" son of Richard the Lion-Hearted, gives up tangible worldly goods for the honorable name of Plantagenet. He also feels a bond of responsibility and affection for the young prince. Falstaff (in this as in other instances not easily fitted into narrow pigeonholes) purports to live by unprincipled craft. But his real interest is his love of jest, of life. Parent-like, he feels the responsibility of inculcating in Hal his belief in the "humane principle" of sack. Lear's Fool,

1. TGIV 1v.14-38.


himself abiding by moral nature, implies criticism of Goneril and Regan for their failure to recognize this "natural" tie of children to parents. And even a briefly sketched figure like the Porter in *Macbeth* can suggest this sort of nature. As the Bellman of Hellgate, he speaks through a drunken stupor of a moral universe, a universe in which those who take knavish advantage of others set their feet on the broad path to damnation.

The first two sorts of fool representing human nature's failures to realize its highest humanity, the truly-wise fool suggesting man's successful attempt to rise above both affectation and narrow self-seeking: in these ways, the fools in Shakespeare's plays figure importantly in this second strand of the central appearance-versus-reality theme.

In making these figures relevant to both aspects of the underlying philosophic meaning, Shakespeare departs from English stage convention. But at the same time, as Miss Welsford notes, this use of the figures also reminds us how deep and wide-spreading were the roots of his art. Long before the drama evolved, the popular imagination had shaped the various social types of fool in accord

1. *The Fool* calls them "parings," I.iv.206; he implies that they are "Lady the brach" who "may stand by the fire and stink," I.iv.124-25.

2. II.iii.10-21.
with the foibles and profundities of human nature. The harmless fools of English society were, like the figures I have called literal fools, reputed to be habitually incapable of seeing their own nature, and of living by any other standard than that of social convention. The vicious fools and the parasitical buffoons also were popularly believed to deny their own higher nature in order to satisfy their individualistic desires. And the court fool was popularly believed to be the "sage-fool" who, because he could see and speak truth, came to stand for the world of the spirit. 1 By exploiting such ancient feelings connected with these figures, Shakespeare managed to turn the fools into the best sort of dramatic symbols. Unobtrusive as symbols, they yet intensify the particular ironies of the appearance-versus-reality theme.

Now that we have examined the characteristic place which the fools in Shakespeare's plays occupy on the level of underlying meaning, we may examine Thersites in these concluding paragraphs to determine whether or not he serves to emphasize this level of meaning in Troilus and Cressida.

As Knights has shown (and as we shall see in more

1. For those deep-rooted feelings popularly connected with the various fools of society, see Ramsey, "Introduction," p.c., Welsford, pp. 67-69, 107, 110, 112, 239-44. See also Busby, pp. 8-12, for a similar opinion, and supra, p. 35.
The ambiguity-of-appearance strand is central to this play. The valiant warriors are actually other than valiant; the generals, other than wise; the glamorous Helen, other than beautiful, beneath the skin at least. And I believe it is, at least in part, through Thersites that the spectator comes to have some notion of the disparity between false appearance and actuality. Thersites' "pageant of Ajax," for example, reveals that he is not a victim of superficial fair appearance. His droll mockery of Ajax, his images of him as a "peacock" who "stalks up and down ... a stride and a stand," suggests the fool's realistic appraisal of apparent bravery as actual pride. Ajax, of course, fools no one in the play. Nestor, Ulysses, even Agamemnon, all mock him for his conceit. But it is (we recall) this sort of appraisal, fundamental as it is, which the literal fools in Shakespeare's plays are incapable of making.

His reference to Helen as a "placket," a comment also mentioned earlier, further indicates that Thersites is not a victim of false appearance. True, it might suggest that he, like the worldly-wise fools, strips what is actually valuable of its worth. But Helen, as her conduct and conversation both indicate, is in fact an inconsequential wanton. As the direct cause of the Trojan War, her

1. Knights, pp. 71-73, 77. Appropriately, his chapter on the play is entitled, "Appearance and Reality in Troilus and Cressida."
lack of moral responsibility is particularly degrading. Thus when Thersites refers to her not only as a placket but also as a "whore," we come to a better understanding of his vision: he does not merely see with the realist's eye, but sees in terms of a deeper reality, the reality of moral implications. Such criticism of Helen (as well as other comments which we shall examine later) renders him unlike Mercutio, who leers through his jests at the notion of illicit sex. It also reveals how little he resembles Pandarus, with whom (as the reader will recall) he is frequently compared. Cressida's uncle is content to see Helen as a symbol of beauty; if not wholly deceived by her appearance, he is yet willing to flatter her. But Thersites' insight bores beneath fair outer appearance to her actual shoddy moral state. He makes no effort to disguise, in the interest of expediency, the decadence which the Paris-Helen affair represents. In his ability to see beneath fair appearance, and in his unwillingness to disguise false appearance, he shows (like the Bastard in King John who sees beneath the rhetoric of Pandulph's "policy") both the "sight" of a sharpened common sense, and insight. In revealing deceptive appearance for what it is, and in being disguised by the position and manners of a professional fool, Thersites embodies both the sight and clothes patterns, becoming relevant to the important ambiguity-of-
appearance strand. We will of course have need to consider his function on this level of meaning further. But for the moment, these two instances alone make it possible to say that Thersites, his vision cutting through layers of deceptive appearance, becomes integral to this aspect of the underlying philosophical meaning as do the truly-wise fools in other Shakespearean dramas.

As may be seen by considering one or two further instances from Thersites' role, his place in the nature-of-nature strand is no less important. As the dramatic context makes clear, none of the warriors in Troilus and Cressida follows nature in the third sense in which I have used the word. The Trojan War is fought in violation of all ethical codes. It is primarily from Thersites that the explicit criticism of these violations comes. We may for present purposes consider a minor, if extreme, instance of this criticism. In the final act (as the reader may recall), Thersites criticizes the effeminate young courtier Patroclus: "... Thou idle immaterial skein of sleeve silk, thou green sarcenet flap for a sore eye, thou tassel of a prodigal's purse thou? Ah, how the poor world is pestered with such water flies, diminutives of nature!"

1. See supra, p. 50.
2. V.i.34-39.
This blistering attack, suggesting disgust at Patroclus’ superficiality, his failure to achieve his "natural" capacity, is a criticism of one who follows the caprices of social convention. Clearly, unlike such literal fools as Andre Aguecheek, Thersites’ place is to criticize, not follow, the shifting currents of social rules.

Moreover, this criticism (indicating that Thersites does not embody the values of the literal fools in Shakespeare’s plays) also suggests that he does not follow amoral nature as the worldly-wise fools do. His bitter tirade is triggered by a "preposterous" discovery. Patroclus and Achilles are involved in what may be termed a most "unnatural" human relationship: Patroclus has become Achilles’ "masculine whore."¹ If Thersites were purely cynical, worldly wise, such a discovery could not rouse him to anger; it would be but one more proof of man’s essential vulgarity. If he regarded human nature as Touchstone does, he might simply wink at this folly. If he were a more sophisticated Pompey, he might argue himself into turning bawd for such appetites. But in fact, he condemns this act, just as Faulconbridge condemns what he takes to be the murder of young Arthur. Like the Fool’s remarks in King Lear, Thersites’ comments serve to make

¹ V.1.20.
despicable the satisfaction of perverse individual demands of a self-seeking that leads to the destruction of moral order. In this aspect of his character also, Thersites suggests the moral order which the truly-wise fools in Shakespeare's play ordinarily embody.

Thersites' place in these strands of meaning extends beyond such examples, and must be studied more closely. Accordingly, with these indications that Thersites becomes central to the drama's underlying philosophical meaning, and does so in the particular fashion of the figures I have called the truly-wise fools, let us turn directly to a more systematic consideration of his role in the drama.
CHAPTER IV

THERSITES IN TROILUS AND CRESSIDA:

SHAKESPEARE'S USE OF THE FOOL FIGURE

Although students of Shakespeare's dramas have frequently denied Thersites a place among fools in other Shakespearean dramas, I believe this figure is an excellent illustration of Shakespeare's use of traditional material. In Thersites can be seen, with exceptional clarity, the poet-playwright's skill in utilizing tradition to express a deeply affecting view of fundamental human problems. But before we consider Thersites' role in the light offered by the material of the two previous chapters, we should understand how far our study of tradition has brought us, and how much farther it can be expected to take us, toward our goal: a clear understanding of Thersites. By noting certain prominent characteristics in his role, we have come to link him with the court fool of popular tradition. By considering the sort of comic relief and commentary to be found in his role and suggesting some

1. Supra, pp. 16-17.
2. Supra, pp. 49-51.
of its philosophical significance, we have come to see parallels between Thersites and fools in other Shakespearean dramas, particularly between him and the figures I have called the truly-wise fools. All this has been suggested by taking Thersites out of his own immediate dramatic environment and viewing him in the light cast by the ancient fool tradition.

But it is not my purpose to isolate Thersites from the drama: A full understanding of the figure will be gained only by examining him in situ. And a study of tradition alone would not permit us to achieve this goal. Therefore, what I propose in this chapter is to shift emphasis from Thersites as a part of the fool tradition to Thersites as an integral part of this particular drama; to reinvestigate the text of Troilus and Cressida, with the insights gleaned from the preceding study always at hand. I do not wish to give the impression of proposing to "explain" Thersites' role, unequivocably and dictatorially, by reference to this tradition. Insurmountable difficulties would plague such an effort. Material in the hands of the people acquires many facets; in Shakespeare's dramas, material which seems to be traditional takes on myriad shapes, apparently imposed by the requirements of the total dramatic design. But if tradition cannot dictate

our interpretation of Thersites' role, it may clarify and enrich our understanding of it. There will be need for constant reference to both these bodies of evidence: the fool tradition as we have seen it, and the text of *Troilus and Cressida*. For Thersites, in his place in the play, in his function, and in the symbolic significances of his character and role, although rooted in tradition, has taken on a shape which suits the particular requirements of the strangely disturbing play of which he is a part.

By way of characterizing, in skeletal form, Thersites' place in the drama, we may say that he fulfills the social position of professional entertainer, particularly the entertainer of Ajax, Achilles, and Patroclus. In the first part of the play he comments mainly upon scenes which make up what may be called the "war plot," the line of action which deals primarily with the efforts of

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1. It may seem that a third body of material—Chapman's Homer—is also relevant; as the reader will recall, many writers have suggested that Thersites is merely Homer's figure "made dramatically credible," as Goldsmith says. But there is much uncertainty about the publication date of Chapman's Homer and, since we have no way of establishing with any reasonable certainty that Chapman's *Iliad* was Shakespeare's source, I prefer not to become entangled in this question. One thing, however, is clear. Even if Shakespeare made use of the *Iliad* in designing Thersites, he still made changes in the figure. The reader will remember that Homer's Thersites is easily subdued by the punishment inflicted upon him by the generals; he is the butt of the warrior's laughter, and of the reader's as well. Homer himself, as narrator, carefully discredits Thersites. But Shakespeare's Thersites is all but indomitable; no character ever bests him in a discussion, and Shakespeare does not discredit his figure.
the Grecian generals to lure Achilles back into the Trojan-Greek conflict. In the final act, he moves into scenes which are of importance to the "love plot," the line of action which is primarily concerned with the affair of Troilus and Cressida. As we shall see in more detail later, war plot and love plot are distinct, but not really separate: the public affair and the private one interrelate and implicitly comment upon one another. In the final scenes, when Greeks and Trojans meet and even a formal distinction between the two lines of action dissolves, Thersites is almost continually on stage. In his appearances throughout the play, he jests and comments, both to the dramatic characters and to the audience, on almost all aspects of both lines of the action. In the final act, he directs the major portion of his commentary to the audience.

The foregoing gives some notion of Thersites' situation in the drama. This place is roughly analogous to the position which the court fool of popular tradition held: that of the detached observer of life. It is also more or less the position of the stage fool in English drama generally and in Shakespearean drama particularly: a place which allows the fool to stand apart from the action and serve as an intermediary between stage and auditorium. As I have observed, it is his position as a privileged entertainer, his detachment from the individual
and social aims of the principals, and his characteristic
types of jesting which link him with the court fool of
popular tradition.

But a mere outline of Thersites' role, suggesting
a relationship with these traditional figures, may leave
the wrong impression. For in the spirit of his conception
if not in the letter, Thersites' portrayal departs from the
ordinary portrayal of the court fool. What is the nature
of this departure? What is its general tendency, and what
significance has it for the drama? If we are to understand
Thersites' place in Troilus and Cressida, we must seek
answers to these questions. We may best hazard an answer
to the first by comparing Thersites' situation with the
position that the court fool was popularly thought of as
holding, a position portrayed by Shakespeare in the shaping
of Feste and Lear's Fool.

We see one aspect of this departure from tradition
in Thersites' relationship with Achilles and Ajax, each of
whom claims the fool as his own. The bond between King Lear
and the Fool epitomizes the traditional fool-master bond.
In popular belief, at least, the court fool was customarily
linked with, and dependent upon, a single kindly master; the
noble of Tudor and Elizabethan England regarded the fool's
interpretation of events as amusing and occasionally worth
heeding; the lash, although frequently threatened, apparently
fell only rarely upon the fool's defenseless shoulders. But the Thersites-Ajax-Achilles relationship is almost a travesty of this bond. Ajax and Achilles squabble and part company over the question of who actually owns the fool. Thersites himself claims to serve no one, but to "serve here voluntary." Moreover, Patroclus, Ajax and Achilles occasionally applaud Thersites, but they do not appreciate or attend to his commentary. And he is not only threatened with physical punishment, but actually beaten until he cries out, "Dost thou think I have no wit, thou strikest me thus?"

Similarly, a difference between Thersites' detachment and the detachment characteristically associated with the court fool makes itself felt. Poplarly, the court fool was regarded as belonging outside the pale of organized, "normal" society, but he was connected to it by his bond with a master. It is this position which Lear's Fool occupies. Thersites' detachment goes much farther. He is not closely connected with any one principal figure of either war plot or love plot. In the final act particularly he is isolated from human companionship, alienated from his fellows. But it is in his characteristic jesting, the

2. II.i.104.
3. II.i.23-24.
bitterness which characterizes much of his role, that he departs most noticeably from the popular conception of the court fool. Conventionally, the court fool took refuge beneath equivocation whenever he found it necessary to jest his betters into taking a closer look at their actions. But Thersites' humor is rarely touched with genial equivocation. His comments, couched in conventional patterns such as that of chop-logic and mock-benedictions, do not take the form of cultured jesting, socially acceptable and intended primarily to entertain. Feste, in Twelfth Night, is a past master at masking criticisms beneath nonsensical equivocation. Thersites, on the other hand, turns conventional jesting devices into vessels for disquieting notions about the principals, notions which contain the sharp sting of accuracy. It is this veracity, moreover, which lifts his harsh comments out of the realm of mere abuse.

In general, these departures from tradition—the nobles' vicious brutality and inattention to Thersites, the fool's extreme detachment, and his sorely bitter denunciations—all tend in one direction: to suggest a violation of the expected order of things. Ajax shows a willful disregard for traditional restraints in beating the fool. Thersites himself casts aside much of the fool's expected geniality, giving up the pleasures of jest for the angry and corrosive laughter which is frankly critical of the
way things about him are going.

Of what possible significance, for the student's understanding of *Troilus and Cressida* as a whole, are these departures from tradition? To answer this question, we must examine Thersites' place in the two main lines of action in detail.

**The Devil Lechery: Thersites in the Love Plot.**
What I have referred to as the love plot, a term denoting specifically the illicit affair between Troilus and Cressida and the ultimate betrayal of Troilus by Cressida in her subsequent alliance with Diomedes, might better be called the drama's "love motif," so as to include two other love affairs. The Polixena-Achilles-Patroclus triangle and the Helen-Paris-Menelaus triangle both parallel the major affair. Perhaps even more appropriate would be the term Heilman uses to refer to one pattern in *King Lear*, the "sex motif," for like the great tragedy, *Troilus and Cressida* says almost nothing about chaste love.\(^1\) And, at important—that is, emotionally and imaginatively significant—moments in the drama, Thersites' sardonic comments reflect upon these unchaste relationships.

Thersites' contact with the Polyxena-Achilles-Patroclus and the Paris-Helen-Menelaus triangles is minimal.

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But it serves to point out the corruption, the denial of everything human love is supposed to be, which characterizes them. In the former of these two affairs, Achilles holds the pivotal position. It is he who betrays a vow to Polyxena under the sway of a greater emotion, the emotion he feels for Patroclus. The affair is of some importance to the action, since his declaration of love for Polyxena serves as an excuse for his refusal to fight, and his attachment to Patroclus provides the actual motivation for his entrance into battle. Thematically too it is of significance: Achilles' declared feeling for Polyxena is at variance with what seems to be his actual feelings: at the first opportunity his "love" is put to any real test, it has no influence on him. In his attachment to Patroclus, he, like other lovers in the drama, has placed faith in one who has little intrinsic worth; the attachment is unnatural, unhealthy in its corrupting influence. When he first mentions his love for Polyxena, Achilles reveals something of his character: the affair is apparently attractive to him because it enhances his own importance; it is a further expression of his pride and his own particular sort of willful belligerence.

1. V.i.46-48; V.viii.31-34, 45-47.
2. In speaking with Ulysses, his sole concern seems to be that his secret romance has been discovered, III.iii.194.
so far as the play indicates, does he come to a clearer understanding of the nature of love, its power to transform selfishness into selflessness; he never comprehends the inadequacy of his approach to this emotion. It is this essential shallowness that one of Thersites' jests, strategically placed so as to mock Achilles' emphasis upon the depth of his inner conflict, points out. "Would that the fountain of your mind were clear again," Thersites says, "that I might water an ass at it!" 1

Achilles' attachment to Patroclus, on the other hand, if scarcely love of a higher order, is a far stronger emotion. And of the object of this attachment, the "water-fly" Patroclus, Thersites has much to say. The fool emphasizes, on several occasions, the vapid courtier's worthlessness. He calls him a "gilt counterfeit": that is, Patroclus is (Thersites suggests) like a brass coin thinly plated with gold, intrinsically valueless but passing for valuable currency. 2 The cause of this worthlessness is suggested by Thersites' criticism of the noble: Patroclus is willing to place no restraints on the flaws that humanity is heir to, willing to give in to passion unguided by anything but folly and ignorance. 3 This willingness to float.

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1. III.iii.313-14.
2. II.iii.27-29.
3. II.iii.30-34.
upon the surface of life stains Patroclus with corruption, a corruption which is symptomized by the homosexual relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. Of this particular unchaste union, Thersites is especially critical. His contempt for Patroclus stems at least in part for the noble's effeminate subservience to Achilles; he is "Achilles' brach," Thersites observes with disgust, his "male varlet." Through disease imagery—"... the rotten diseases of the south, the guts-gripping, ruptures; ... incurable boneache ... take and take again such preposterous discoveries!"—Thersites suggests the corruption of healthy creative energies which this unnatural relationship represents. 

Ironically, it is Patroclus' death which finally rouses Achilles to do battle. This then is Patroclus' legacy to Achilles: not a love which helps him cast off his belligerency, but one which gives it full scope.

Like the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus, that of Paris, Menelaus and Helen suggests this same principle of false valuation, and similar inward corruption. This affair is of considerable significance to the play, since the whole Trojan-Greek conflict is the result of the

1. II.1.127; V.1.20.

2. V.1.21-28. See also Heilman, p. 104, for the significance of sex imagery in *King Lear*. 
"rape" of Helen by Paris; it takes a significant place in the theme, Helen representing the contrast between fair external appearance and actual worthlessness and the whole affair a flouting of the "natural," the moral, bond between husband and wife. Helen is central in this threesome as Achilles is in the other; it is she who, apparently with scarcely a backward glance, has betrayed her wedding vows by becoming the willing consort of Paris. It is Thersites who puts his finger squarely upon her true nature. Though she may seem to Troilus "a theme of honor and renown," a thing of immeasurable worth, she is completely at home in the court's atmosphere of bawdy and silly smart talk. Her character is, so far as the play reveals, essentially inconsequential. It is this insubstantiality, with its corresponding lack of moral sense, which Thersites emphasizes when he calls her a "placket" and a "whore."

The error of taking Helen's outer appearance as a measure of her true worth has severe consequences for several characters; Paris and Menelaus, Thersites points out, are reduced to the merely animal. Paris is described

1. Cassandra, the "mad" prophetess, says, "Our firebrand brother Paris burns us all." II.1.110. See also Shakespeare's Rape of Lucrece, 1475-1476: "Thy heat of lust, fond Paris, did incur;/This load of wrath that burning Troy did bear."

2. II.11.199; see Pandarus' description of an inane conversation, I.11.168-82, which Helen thoroughly enjoys; see also Helen's own conversation, III.iii.85-151.
as a "dog" who baits Menelaus, the bear. Repeatedly Menelaus is compared to the animals which particularly suggest sexual desire and stupidity. He is of course compared to the bull, an animal characteristically conceived of as driven by instinctual desire and as a symbol of the cuckold; the ox; the ass. In this dramatic context, these metaphors suggest sexual license and stupidity, the nature allowed to the lower animals but degrading in man. From Thersites' comments, taken in conjunction with the action of the play, it becomes clear that the dignity commonly ascribed to human emotion is denied these men and women. They have, in fact, sacrificed it themselves, by failing to judge in terms of actual worth.

Like these two triangles, the Troilus-Cressida-Diomedes complication also partakes of this fundamental dissolution of moral and psychical order, the result of false valuation. This three-sided affair, upon which Thersites' comments are most extensive, is of course central to the action: the consummation of Troilus' passion and his betrayal by Cressida make up the nucleus of the love-plot. It is no less important on the thematic level: in evaluating Cressida, Troilus errs and a tremendous upheaval in his personal universe is the result.

1. V.vii.9-12; V.1.64-67.
Thersites first comes in contact with this romance in the betrayal scene, the scene in which Cressida wavers between her two lovers, watched by Troilus and Ulysses. Thersites himself observes the whole tableau "at a distance." It is Thersites who points out Cressida's wavering. Throughout the scene, she cannot choose between loyalty to Troilus and the excitement of conquest. This continual see-sawing between mutually exclusive desires is pointed out by Thersites. At her first weak refusal of Diomedes' proposal he exclaims, "Roguery!" At her second and stronger refusal he says, "Now she sharpens! Well said, whetstone!" At her final capitulation to his blandishments, Thersites condemns her for her folly. She attempts to justify this capitulation with her characteristic habit of eluding personal responsibility. Self-pitying, she says, "Ah, poor our sex! The error of our eye directs our mind." But a mere shrugging off of responsibility does not free one of it, and Thersites' succinct verse serves to point up the implications of her actions:

A proof of strength she could not publish more
Unless she said, 'My mind is now turned whore.'

1. This stage direction for II.11 at Thersites' entrance gives an idea of Thersites' placement in the scene. It is of course not Shakespeare's direction.
2. V.11.19, 74, 102.
4. V.11.113-114.
It is significant that her error with Diomedes—giving in to the lure of transitory passion—does not differ essentially from the error she makes with Troilus. With him too she wavers between acceptance and rejection; with him too she gives in to the transitory pleasure of passion, dedicating her folly to Pandarus.¹ With Troilus as with Diomedes, the intuition of her "better self" has been tricked by her eyes, and she ends by cheapening herself. Ultimately, then, she proves herself morally irresponsible. It is significant that, from this point on, Thersites refers to her solely by the term "whore."² It is the function of his observations, as it is their function in dealing with Helen and Achilles, to pick up this underlying truth, the truth that most other men in the drama prefer to ignore. Through his sardonic and pejorative criticism, her decision is taken out of the amoral world where responsibility can be dismissed at will, placed and judged in a world of ordered moral choices.

By casting her lot with Diomedes, Cressida—the "worse" Cressida who leaves Troilus to become another's fool—gets what she deserves. Diomedes is, as Thersites continually points out, "a false-hearted rogue, a most

¹. III.iii.115-57, 110.

². V.iv.6. He also uses a synonym, "drab," V.iv.8.
unjust knave." But Troilus' fate, though it may be pitiable, is equally fitting and inevitable. He has been guilty of a serious error in perception when he overlooked, and even took advantage of, Cressida's weakness. Ironically, it is this same faulty perception which has led him to ascribe worth to the worthless Helen, a judgment which was in part responsible for the continuation of the war and hence (indirectly at least) for placing Cressida among "the merry Greeks." To add a further ironic twist, Troilus, just at the point when (given ocular proof) he should be aware of his self-deception about Cressida, only entangles himself in further deception. He takes refuge in denying the flesh-and-blood reality. Thersites, however, applying Dr. Johnson's method of refuting Berkeley, pins Troilus' metaphysical efforts to the exigencies of reality: "Will 'a swagger himself out on 's own eyes?" "Swagger," carrying the connotation of military bearing, recalls the young Trojan's attitude in the war council, where he achieved his subjective desires. It is to a malfunctioning of the organ of sight--symbolic of perception, of insight--that Thersites refers. But, so far as the

1. V.i.95-96.
2. IV.iv.59.
3. V.ii.136. For Troilus' attempt to convince himself, see V.ii.129-135. At one point he says, "Rather think this is not Cressid." (V.ii.134.)
play reveals, Troilus does not succeed in seeing better. Instead, psychologically, he is, in this final act, where King Lear is in the second act of his tragedy: unable to admit that he has placed faith in those who are morally irresponsible. It is directly here, in this error in valuation, that the burden of responsibility for his inward disorder must be laid.

Achilles, Patroclus, Helen, Menelaus, Paris, Troilus, Cressida: all the lovers share a lack of understanding of themselves and of the universe. This lack keeps them from transcending the level of transitory sensual experience. But, as if Thersites' comments on the sexuality of these three affairs are not enough to condemn this kind of experience, Shakespeare also permits him countless direct criticisms of sexuality generally, of lust as it masquerades as love. In describing Diomedes particularly, Thersites calls attention to the general incontinence: "Nothing but lechery! All incontinent valets!"\(^1\) As Diomedes and Cressida come to terms and Troilus becomes more and more agitated, Thersites says, "How the devil luxury, with his fat rump and potato finger, tickles these together!"\(^2\)

Giving lechery the physical attributes of "rump" and "finger,"

1. V.ii.106.
2. V.ii.55-56.
Thersites offers a concrete image to depict the emotion of Diomedes and Cressida as the action presents it. And frequent other references to lechery in the final act leave the impression, an impression not contradicted by any of the principals, that lechery is in fact the force which motivates the lovers.\(^1\) Moreover, the self-destructive nature of unleashed sensuality is defined by Thersites: referring to Diomedes and Troilus, the "wenching rogues," he says, "I think they have swallowed one another. I would laugh at that miracle—yet in a sort lechery eats itself."\(^2\) By the uncontrolled passion to which they have given in, the better part of Achilles, Troilus, Cressida has been consumed.

Thus it is, I believe, from the strangely alienated Thersites that the explicit criticism of these unchaste relationships comes, criticism which points out the errors in perception and the moral dissolution involved in them. And from this reversal of the expected—the despised fool, after all, should not see more deeply into the reality of things and their actual value than those who are supposedly able to function in society—stems a paradox which lies close to the heart of the play. Those who appear healthy

\(^1\) See V.ii.196-97, V.iv.1-10.

\(^2\) V.iv.35-37.
(as Helen and Patroclus do) may be actually diseased and corrupt. Those who appear to be well-adjusted, following the conventions of accepted social morality, may live always on the border of madness. Thersites, as a fool, serves to heighten this paradox.

Shakespeare frequently used the figure of the fool to point out the principal character's errors in perception, particularly errors which have their source in love. Such figures are Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Costard in *Love's Labor's Lost*. But a comparison between Thersites and Costard, for example, shows how well-suited Thersites is to the dramatic situation of his drama. In *Love's Labor's Lost*, as in *Troilus and Cressida*, there is a betrayal scene in which the principal characters, thinking themselves alone, declare a love which breaks an earlier oath. In both, it is the fool who points out the principals' breaking of their oath to the spectator. Costard, however, merely stumbles into the scene, accidentally revealing Berowne's hypocrisy. But Thersites is, throughout, the observer of the action and, in criticizing the principals' conduct, is fully aware of the implications of their action.¹ In *Love's Labor's Lost*, of course, the nobles' errors lead them to

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1. LLL IV.iii.1-189; for Costard's part in this scene, see 190-215.
a harmless treason, a treason which is in the final analysis a loyalty to their actual human nature. Therefore Costard's criticism, oblique rather than direct, is suitable to the dramatic context. But in Troilus and Cressida, the betrayal of oaths represents an alliance with amoral nature. And it is in large part Thersites' scathing disgust which shows how far from harmless this betrayal has been. Thus Thersites helps to define, in terms of human values, the action of the love plot. His comments, springing from a contempt for this gross parody of love, serve to screw up the dramatic tension of these various important scenes, and drive the spectator to question the intrinsic worth of purely sensual experience.

A Plague of Opinions: Thersites in the War Plot.
The fundamental reversal of values affecting the figures in the love plot corresponds to, and partakes of, a larger disruption of order. In the war plot, the transvaluation of values, the elevation of vice to a position of social virtue, is made explicit. In this aspect of the action, Thersites functions to criticize the disruption of social order.

One of the sources of this vast disorder, a disorder which masquerades as social order, is the leaders' abdication of responsibility. Particularly is this
emphasized in the leaders of the Greek camp. In the Grecian war council, the aged Agamemnon and Nestor are regarded as the rightful leaders of the Greeks. But they are little more than figureheads. Agamemnon's speech is characteristic of him: almost embarrassingly long, it consists largely of truisms. In terms of practical advice or moral direction, it is all but useless. Central to his character, both as it is revealed in this scene and as it is shown throughout the play, is a moral and intellectual laziness, and a resultant failure to grasp the implications of any situation. 1 Agamemnon is not a willfully bad man: as Thersites says, he is "an honest fellow enough. . . ." But he is not a fit leader: as Thersites continues, "... he has not so much brains as earwax." 2 Nestor, moreover, is almost a carbon copy of Agamemnon. His speech in the war council is scarcely less trite, and he fails to lead the warriors with the wisdom that proverbially accompanies old age. Although regarded as wise, Nestor has grown less quick of mind: as he says of himself, "I see not with these old eyes." 3 It is Thersites who calls attention to these flaws: the general's failure

1. I.iii.1-30, Agamemnon's mind is easily influenced by Ulysses, II.iii.192-94.
2. V.i.56-57.
3. I.iii.30-53; I.iii.366.
to ask enough questions, his willingness to fall in with unscrupulous power. As Thersites points out, Nestor has not the wisdom of the old, but the senility: the general tells Achilles and Ajax that the general's "wit was moldy ere your grandsires had nails on their toes, . . . "  

Just as Thersites indicates the presence of these failings, so also does he call attention to the implications, in terms of human experience, of these leaders' laxity. He speaks of Agamemnon and his lack of "matter"—i.e., brain matter—by means of the metaphor of a boil running with pus. The metaphor serves as a kind of mockery of Ulysses' image of the general, Agamemnon as a "hive/ To whom the foragers shall all repair." But in reality, as Thersites points out, Agamemnon has not even as much matter as a "botchy core": a corrupting rather than a vivifying well-spring of power for his people. Similarly, by describing Nestor's lack of wisdom in images of stale food, Thersites suggests that he, like Agamemnon, also lacks the capacity to offer any vital aid to those who seek it.

The Grecian generals then—in their characters unalterable "band-wagon men"—tacitly open the gate for

1. II.i.114-116.
2. II.i.1-89.
3. I.iii.81.
4. II.i.6.
a breakdown in social order. And it is largely through Thersites that this aspect of their characters is emphasized. But a more active mind, that of Ulysses, is the immediate catalyst for this breakdown; once again, it is Thersites who emphasizes that Ulysses' policy is a modus operandi which has negative implications no matter how necessary it may seem.

In the war council, Ulysses speaks of a moral order, which represents in its way a positive value. But in action, he stoops to a stratagem which is not a very noble example of statesmanship: a rigged lottery which has as its aim the pitting of Ajax's pride against Achilles. As Nestor says, "Two curs shall tame each other. Pride alone/ Must tarre the mastiffs on, . . ."² In the scene following the war council, Thersites offers not one but two interpretations of the proposal, both designed to call attention to its ignoble nature. In one, he reflects Ulysses' own metaphor—"Let us, like merchants, show our foulest wares/ And think perchance they'll sell"—when he says to Ajax, "You are bought and sold among those of any wit/ Like a barbarian slave." The second is no less pointed, and no more flattering.³

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1. The phrase quoted is taken from Heilman, p. 43.
2. I.iii.391-92.
3. II.1.50-51, 116-117.
In the scenes following the war council, Ulysses gives full scope to the Machiavellian habit of mind, the habit which sets the young dace as bait for the old pike. In engineering this piece of statescraft, he reverses traditional values completely: he attempts to persuade Achilles that true value lies in public applause, not in man's actual deeds. Although he does not, it is true, claim this point of view is right, Ulysses (if he wished to direct Achilles toward true values) would not attempt to persuade him that "dust that is a little gilt" is worth more than "gilt o'erdusted." But one of Thersites' comments helps the spectator to right this reversal. Directly after the discussion between Achilles and Ulysses, he presents a counterview of the worth of reputation: "A plague of opinion! A man may wear it on both sides, like a leather jerkin." Ulysses, although himself recognizing the transitory nature of public appearance, yet uses it to goad Achilles into war. The disinterested fool, achieving a similar insight, indicates this flaw: the ease with which opinion changes. As Knights observes, the Greeks are generally creatures of time and appearance. But Thersites

1. III.iii.178-179.
2. III.iii.265-66.
both recognizes and rejects the values of public appearance by which the Greeks, led by Ulysses, live.

The outcome of Ulysses' plan, like its inception, is singularly unimpressive. It is in fact a failure: Patroclus' death, not Ulysses' policy, causes Achilles to re-enter the fray. And in a final succinct summary, Thersites mentions the outcome of Ulysses plan: "... The policy of those crafty swearing rascals ... is not proved worth a blackberry." Picking up Nestor's imagery, he continues, "They set me up in policy that mongrel our Ajax against that dog of as bad a kind Achilles. And now is the cur Ajax prouder than the cur Achilles."¹ In suggesting that the two manipulate the warriors like unruly animals, Thersites points out a grim flaw in Ulysses' reasoning as it applies to human beings. While the generals confidently believe in their ability to direct these instincts, they fail to recognize that such energies, lawless in their very nature, cannot be controlled. The ultimate effect of unleashing these emotions, as Thersites concludes, is to cause civilized beings to "proclaim barbarism."²

In fact, by this error in reasoning, Ulysses works against the system of hierarchical responsibilities

1. V.iv.9-15.
2. V.iv.17.
which he intends to restore. In his oration on Degree, he draws an analogy between heavenly and human order, and then goes on to describe the disruption of order:

The heavens themselves, the planets and this center
Observe degree, priority, and place,

... But when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues and what portents, what mutiny
What raging of the sea, shaking of earth ...

This chaos when degree is suffocate
Follows the choking. 1

Ironically, although Ulysses is not aware of it, this chaos which he hopes to prevent already rages in the Greek camp. Beneath the facade of "normal" social order, Agamemnon fails to control his underlings. Ulysses, in usurping Agamemnon's place, automatically creates disorder. To this actual state of disorder Thersites calls attention. In a characteristically Shakespearean scene of comic relief, he utters almost a parody of Ulysses' degree speech.

I'll decline the whole question. Agamemnon commands Achilles, Achilles is my lord, I am Patroclus' knower, and Patroclus is a fool.

Agamemnon is a fool, Achilles is a fool, Thersites is a fool, and, as aforesaid, Patroclus is a fool.

1. I.iii.85-86, 94-95, 125-26.
Agamemnon is a fool to offer to command Achilles, Achilles is a fool to be commanded of Agamemnon Thersites is a fool to serve such a fool, and Patroclus is a fool positive. 1

This "version" of the hierarchy in the Greek camp indicates, with accuracy, the lack of genuine moral order in the Greek camp: the Grecians are in no sense representatives of the sort of order Ulysses describes. And Ulysses' policy--as Thersites says, the policy of a "dog-fox"--2 only makes the whole situation worse, fomenting discord rather than eliminating it.

Among the lesser warriors, this discord is pervasive. What is known to twentieth-century corporation men as one-up-manship, a continual jockeying for improved position, leads the warriors to vie with one another. Thersites, angered by their stupidity, falls out with them both. Ulysses and Nestor, with a practical eye to immediate ways and means, believe the division useful to their ends. Shrewdly they feed Ajax's pride to make him more malleable; at the same time they cruelly mock him for his gullibility. 3 But in this shrewd worldliness is (ironically) an unperceptive

1. II.i.iii.55-58, 60-65, 68-70. For a mention of this speech, see Traversi, p. 227.
2. V.iv.11.
3. II.i.129-131. It is significant that, in the next scene of which Thersites is a part, Achilles indicates that the fool has been absent for quite a lengthy time, II.i.iii.43-46, II.i.iii.190-275.
naivete: they fail to understand how serious the consequences of what they intend may be. Yet the play, with Thersites as one of its principal agents, does not permit the audience to overlook the tension, the lack of mutual trust which is the cost of discord. There is the menacing suggestion of brutality always near at hand. Ajax's vicious treatment of Thersites—a reaction unwarranted by the fool's jesting, since the "privileged man" was encouraged to aid men in recognizing the part of their character they preferred to overlook—indicates its presence. Again, Thersites points out the effect which encouraging Ajax's pride has on the warrior: he has become unnatural, unable to communicate with his fellows: "a very land-fish, languageless, a monster."¹ False valuation has made Achilles a picture of what he seems, an "idol of idiot-worshippers."² At significant points in the play, Thersites reminds the audience that the warriors are in danger of running amok, and of wreaking destruction.³ And it is in fact egotism

1. III.iii.254-56.
2. V.i.6-7.
3. II.iii.7-17; V.i.53-56. These comments are placed at important moments in the drama: the first precedes by only a few lines Ulysses' first efforts to aid the war effort by setting Ajax and Achilles against one another so that they will draw "their massy irons" and cut "the web," Troy. The second anticipates the actual battle scenes, the beginning of the destruction which comes about because Achilles does in fact "run mad."
and pride, motivations which belong to the lower order of emotion, and which Ulysses and Nestor so carefully nurture, that brings about the final ignominous destruction of Troy.

As we look back over the action of the war plot, it becomes clear that, afflicted by a willful ignorance or by moral and intellectual laziness, the Grecian generals and warriors alike commit folly. They sacrifice long-distance values for short-range goals. They evaluate the human situation inadequately and so bring about destruction: surely even Ulysses could not be comfortable beneath the "dragon wing of night" which rolls over the battlefield after Achilles' Myrmidons murder Hector. While the framework of society may remain, the substance, the human understanding which make it more than a machine to aid the exploitation of man by man, has melted away.

The ultimate source of the difficulty seems to lie in the inception of the war: fought for all the wrong reasons, entered into too lightly. In a sense, placing value upon the war represents Troilus' and Hector's, Ulysses' and Nestor's, faulty major premise. And of this conflict, Thersites is particularly critical. It is a mighty and destructive force let loose without sufficient

1. V.viii.17.

2. Many of the warriors treat the bloody war as if it were a lark. See Aeneas' reference to it as "good sport," I.ii.116.
reason: it is at basis but an "argument" over a "cuckold and a whore," a "good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon." He exits referring to the war as "ominous." Again, the fool emphasizes the faulty valuation which afflicts the principals.

Thus, in the war plot as in the love plot, Thersites serves as a principal means for calling attention to the all-encompassing social disruption, and for indicating some of its causes. This use of the figure again heightens the paradox which is a part of the central meaning of the play: those like Agamemnon who think themselves sound may merely be unaware of their corruption. Those who implement immediate goals, trusting in the purely rational consciousness, may conclude by short-circuiting long-range ends. Through an overemphasis on reason, they unleash energies inimical to reason, energies ultimately destructive to any sort of higher human existence. His comments implying that the fool is wiser than the masters of statesmanship, Thersites heightens this paradox.

So far we have seen that Thersites functions to emphasize the discord, the violation of fundamental (and highest) human order, which is rife in the private and public affairs of Troilus and Cressida. And here seems

1. II.iii.77-79, V.vii.20.
to lie the significance, for the whole drama, of the changes in tradition which Shakespeare saw fit to make in Thersites' role. The nobles' brutality and Thersites' strangely bitter detachment in themselves suggest a profound violation of the expected order of things. They intensify the reaction of rejection and disgust for these principal characters' modes of perception and systems of values—the purely sensual or the purely rational view of the world—which so many of the students of *Troilus and Cressida* experience. By emphasizing the flaws in the principals' characters, Thersites becomes an instrument for clarifying the central meaning, or what seems to me to be a central meaning, of the drama.

Comparison with another truly wise fool in Shakespeare, Falstaff, may be helpful for demonstrating how successfully Thersites' corrosive comments contribute to the disgust with which the principals in *Troilus and Cressida* are regarded. Both Falstaff and Thersites focus upon the humbler realities of war, the ugly underside which the principals overlook. But Falstaff's criticisms of the war are never direct, and frequently ambiguous or even, in the dramatic context, not entirely accurate. On the other hand, Thersites' criticisms of the stupidity of the warriors and the senselessness of the war are both direct and convincing. They indicate dark truths about the dramatic universe which
in this play cannot be ignored.

Wars and Lechery: Thersites as a Link between Plots. There is yet one further aspect of Thersites' role which we have not considered. As I pointed out above, private affair and public conflict interrelate, implicitly commenting on one another. In the two plots, the correspondence between love and war is continually emphasized: the warriors show much interest in the lovers' sexual experience;¹ the lovers of course eventually become warriors; the war as a whole has its source in the lust of Paris and Helen. I would like to add additional evidence to support Empson's view of Thersites as a link between these two plots,² as one who makes clear the similarity between love and war as they are portrayed in this drama.

Thersites points out the warriors' interest in lust: for example, although Agamemnon is no longer active in pursuit of women, he yet takes great pleasure in the kiss Cressida gives him. This interest in sensual experience, without reference to the intrinsic worth of the person with whom the experience is shared, Thersites makes explicit when he calls the general one who "loves quails," courtesans.³ In the same way, Thersites anticipates the

¹ See Aeneas' rather lewd reference to Paris's lying abed, IV.1.3-6.
² See supra, p. 23.
³ V.1.56-57.
lovers' becoming warriors. Troilus, it will be remembered, manages merely to exchange love of Cressida for hate of Diomedes. When Thersites says, "He'll tickle it for his concupisy,"

1 the general import seems to be that, because of his own lust, Troilus will meet Diomedes in battle.

Like the private affair, the Trojan-Greek conflict has its genesis in the illicit love of Paris and Helen; this close relationship between unbridled passion and the war is what Thersites calls attention to when he wishes the "Neapolitan boneache"—syphilis, the disease which suggests moral degeneracy—upon those who war for a placket. 2

And of course it is this disease which infects Pandarus, a Trojan, in the last act. 3

Finally, there are several comments which suggest directly the close relationship between lust for sexual pleasure and lust for personal recognition, for reputation. Early in the play, Thersites indicates that "war and lechery" will "confound all"; the comment is of general significance to the play, since it implies the close connection between the final destruction of Troy and the lust of Achilles and Patroclus, Helen and Paris, Troilus and

1. V.ii.177.
2. II.iii.21-24.
3. V.x.35,51.
Cressida. Toward the end of the play, in his comment—
"Still wars and lechery! Nothing else holds fashion!"—he suggests that these are the values which have become socially acceptable in the universe of the Trojan War. By these and similar comments, he helps to weld the two plots together.

Shakespeare's use of Thersites to suggest the pervasive inner disorder which eats away at the society of Troilus and Cressida may differ from his characteristic treatment of fools in his other plays. But it is a difference made necessary, apparently, by the force with which the playwright felt the necessity for man to discard the purely passionate and the purely rational modes of perception if he is to achieve the highest order of nature.

Herman Melville once wrote of the characters in Shakespeare who speak of a certain "blackness":

Through the mouths of certain dark characters, Shakespeare craftily says, or sometimes insinuates, the things that we feel to be so terribly true, that it were all but madness for any man, in his own proper person, to utter, or even hint of them. 3

1. II.iii.82. 2. V.ii.195-196.

Such characters are King Lear in his madness, Hamlet in his emotional distress. So too, I believe, is Thersites a seer of dark truths: aware of, and able to express, the underlying flaws in these characters which are responsible (as King Lear shows even more unequivocably than Troilus and Cressida does) for making man approach the bestial.

And it is particularly in this use of the fool that the tradition which we have studied proves especially illuminating. The fool, of course, was traditionally believed to be capable of catching glimpses of truth, of ultimate spiritual reality, which too often were not seen by more normal men. The fool and the madman, detached from society and connected with the shaman-like figure who was believed to be a mouthpiece for the gods, spoke of things which other men dare not mention, even if they saw these truths. A deviant from the normal social order—supra-human as well as sub-human—the figure was privileged to speak the principles of another order, a higher spiritual order. To Thersites who inherits these traditions... some such symbolic implications and overtones accrue.

Thus, this tradition helps to clarify Thersites' function in Troilus and Cressida. Ironically, it is Thersites the fool who sees the folly of men who are supposed to be wiser than he. It is Thersites, the despised deviant supposedly unable to function in society, who is able to
see the actual illness beneath what, to those who cultivate only the social virtues, seems normality.

So too does this tradition aid the effort to understand and evaluate Thersites' character. This power of perception, his ability to speak of a higher social order than the principal characters of *Troilus and Cressida* recognize, makes Thersites not the intellectual man, not the cynic. The values he comprehends, like those Cassandra "knows" through inspiration, are not visible through the power of the intellect alone. Rather, I suggest that he, like the Fool in *King Lear*, is the man of imagination. Imagination, as Shelley says, may be defined as the synthesizing force, the ability to seek underlying likenesses between apparently unlike things. ¹ Thersites, with his

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¹ "A Defence of Poetry," *The Great Critics*, eds. James H. Smith and Edd W. Parks, 3rd ed. rev. (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1951), pp. 557-58, 560. A succinct expression of Shelley's view of the imagination is quoted by Heilman, p. 152: 'Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities. . . . The great instrument of moral good is the imagination. . . . the vessel of the state is driven between the Scylla and Charybdis of anarchy and despotism. Such are the effects which must ever flow from an unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty.' I believe this statement is particularly relevant for my view of Thersites. It is Thersites who perceives the value—or rather the absence of value—of figures like Cressida, Achilles, Agamemnon. Thersites' criticism of Ulysses for his "unmitigated exercise of the rational faculty" pits the imaginative perception against the "practical"—and (if not aided by the imagination) destructive—rational mind. In speaking of the values perceived by the imagination, Thersites is an instrument of moral good—in the sense that Shelly uses the term, not in any didactic sense.
frequent use of metaphor—comparing Achilles' mind to a shallow fountain, the apparently beautiful Helen to the "placket" she actually is, the apparently sound Agamemnon to a "botchy core," the war to lust and the lust to battle—seems to possess this power of observation and synthesis. It is a power which, in *Troilus and Cressida*, belongs almost solely to Thersites. It is for this power, his in part by right of his inheritance from tradition, that I believe the commonly accepted evaluation of Thersites, Thersites as a morally depraved cynic, is wholly unsatisfactory.¹ Rather the opposite evaluation is due him, I believe. Far from being the most depraved figure in *Troilus and Cressida*, he alone is free from the moral disease which attacks the major characters in the play.

¹ Supra, pp. 8, 23-25.
CONCLUSION

The foregoing pages have of necessity collected and analyzed quantities of material--material connected with the traditional figure of the fool, which stretches back to ancient times; also material connected with Shakespeare's use of the fool figure in a number of his plays--to support the interpretation of Thersites which has been offered. This material has not, of course, been studied in and for itself, but only as evidence to clarify and substantiate the thesis advanced. So as to make quite clear the nature of the latter, it may be useful to recapitulate very briefly the several steps in the argument which has presented it.

A review of the studies that have been thus far offered on the problem of Thersites' antecedents and function in Troilus and Cressida has revealed a great increase of interest in the figure in the last sixty years over the three centuries preceding them. Analysis of these latter studies, however, has shown certain weaknesses, weaknesses which in all of these studies are seated either in the evidence presented or in the particular emphasis of the conclusions. 1 As a result, no full

understanding of the character has been reached.

Because of the absence of any interpretation which offers such an understanding of Thersites—his antecedents, his nearest parallels in English drama, his role in *Troilus and Cressida*—the concluding paragraphs of this first chapter propose such a study, and state the method which, as the most reliable, this paper follows.

In the second chapter, after a preliminary study of the complex popular tradition associated with the fool figure, it is shown, by a process of comparison and contrast, that Thersites is linked with the court fool. His particular types of jesting, his position as a privileged man, and his characteristic detachment all serve to mark him as descended from this figure, a figure long noted for having specific symbolic significance. Detached from active life, the court fool was believed to be a spectator of it, and "spectators, after all, see most of the game"; connected with the inspired madman, the court fool was believed to perceive a spiritual truth denied more normal men.1

In the third chapter, after a study of Shakespeare's characteristic shaping of the fools' roles in his dramas, it is established, again by comparison and contrast, that

certain representative examples from Thersites' comic relief and commentary mark him as being shaped in a particular Shakespearean fashion; that, in his perception of the reality beneath appearance and in his awareness of a moral order which recognized "natural" bonds and responsibilities, he is closely connected with the figures I have called truly-wise fools.¹

With this evidence at hand, the fourth and final chapter proposes a shift in emphasis: a shift from the study of Thersites in the light of tradition to a study of the figure in the light of the text of Troilus and Cressida, an interpretation of the figure's role to be aided by reference to this traditional material. In this study, it becomes evident that, in both the love plot and the war plot, Thersites points out the violation of order. In the love plot, he emphasizes the violation of the bond between lovers and loved ones. In the war plot, he calls attention to the disruption of social order—the moral and mental laxity of the leaders, the pervasive lack of reciprocity and human understanding in the warriors. By this function, Thersites is seen to heighten the paradox which is close to the heart of Troilus and Cressida's meaning: the paradox that the fool, with his angry and corrosive laughter—traditionally "ill," a deviant from the norm—is able to perceive

¹ Pp. 71-75, 94-98.
inner corruption in those who seem "normal," healthy; that the fool—traditionally unable to function in society—is able to perceive disruption in that society, a disorder which tends toward insanity, and which the masters of statesmanship do not see.¹

In understanding the way in which Thersites suggests this paradox (or so it is contended) the study of the fool tradition in Chapter II and III is seen to be particularly useful for evaluating the symbolic significance of Thersites' function. In popular tradition, the fool was frequently used ironically to imply that more normal men, seemingly wise, are actually foolish. No less useful was this study of tradition for indicating the symbolic significance of Thersites' character: Thersites, descended from the court fool who was traditionally regarded as the mouthpiece for the gods, speaks of a moral order, a spiritual way of life of which the principals in Troilus and Cressida either are unaware or willfully ignore. Doing so by means which point out the underlying similarity between apparently unlike things, as he does when he emphasizes the relation between love and war in this play, Thersites represents the man of imagination; not the man of pure intellect, the cynic.

¹. Pp. 129-130.
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